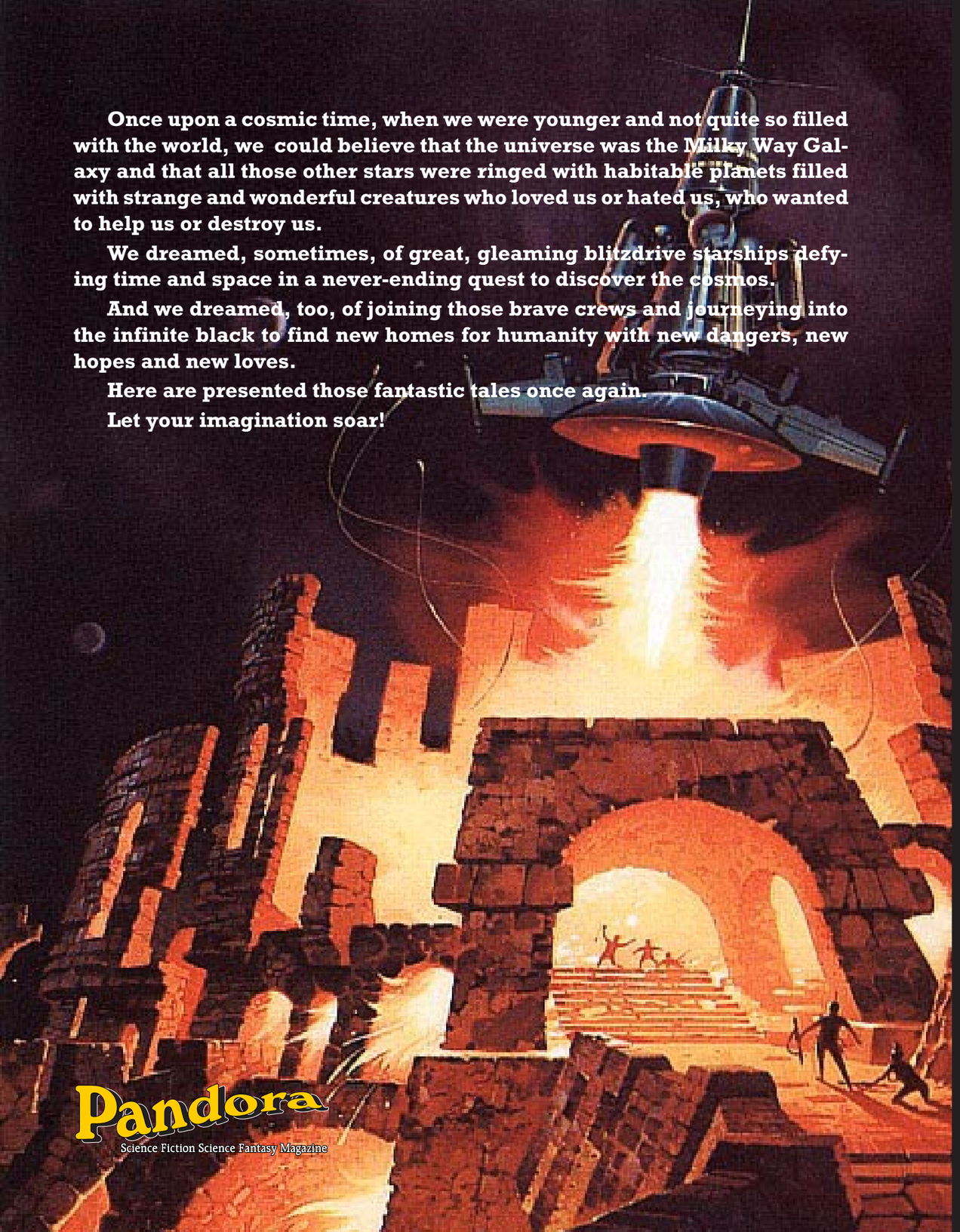

Once upon a cosmic time, when we were younger and not quite so filled with the world, we could believe that the universe was the Milky Way Galaxy and that all those other stars were ringed with habitable planets filled with strange and wonderful creatures who loved us or hated us, who wanted to help us or destroy us.

We dreamed, sometimes, of great, gleaming blitzdrive starships defying time and space in a never-ending quest to discover the cosmos.

And we dreamed, too, of joining those brave crews and journeying into the infinite black to find new homes for humanity with new dangers, new hopes and new loves.

Here are presented those fantastic tales once again.

Let your imagination soar!

Pandora

Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

# Pandora

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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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# Pandora

Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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# Pandora

Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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**IN THIS ISSUE**

**Occasion For Disaster**

## OCCASION FOR DISASTER

*A very small slip, at just the wrong place, can devastate any enterprise. One tiny transistor can go wrong ... and ruin a multi-million dollar missile. Which would be one way to stop the missiles....*

*"We must remember not to judge any public servant by any one act, and especially should we beware of attacking the men who are merely the occasions and not the causes of disaster."*

Theodore Roosevelt

In 1914, it was enemy aliens.

In 1930, it was Wobblies.

In 1957, it was fellow-travelers.

In 1971, it was insane telepaths.

And, in 1973:

"We don't know what it is," said Andrew J. Burris, Director of the FBI. He threw his hands in the air and looked baffled and confused.

Kenneth J. Malone tried to appear sympathetic. "What what is?"

Burris frowned and drummed his fingers on his big desk. "Malone," he said, "make sense. And don't stutter."

"Stutter?" Malone said. "You said you didn't know what it was. And I wanted to know what it was."

"That's just it," Burris said. "I don't know."

Malone sighed and repressed an impulse to scream. "Now, wait a minute, Chief—" he started.

Burris frowned again. "Don't call me Chief," he said.

Malone nodded, "O.K.," he said. "But—if you don't know what it is, you must

have some idea of what you don't know. I mean, is it larger than a breadbox? Does it perform helpful tasks? Is it self-employed?''

''Malone,'' Burris sighed, ''you ought to be on television.''

''But—''

''Let me explain,'' Burris said. His voice was calmer now, and he spoke as if he were enunciating nothing but the most obvious and eternal truths. ''The country,'' he said, ''is going to Hell in a handbasket.''

Malone nodded again. ''Well, after all, Chief—'' he started.

''Don't call me Chief,'' Burris said wearily.

''Anything you say,'' Malone agreed peacefully. He eyed the Director of the FBI warily. ''After all, it isn't anything new,'' he went on. ''The country's always been going to Hell in a handbasket, one way or another. Look at Rome.''

''Rome?'' Burris said.

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''Rome was always going to Hell in a handbasket, and finally it—'' He paused. ''Finally it did, I guess,'' he said.

''Exactly,'' Burris said. ''And so are we. Finally.'' He passed a hand over his forehead and stared past Malone at a spot on the wall. Malone turned and looked at the spot, but saw nothing of interest. ''Malone,'' Burris said, and the FBI Agent whirled around again.

''Yes, Ch—Yes?'' he said.

''This time,'' Burris said, ''it isn't the same old story at all. This time it's different.''

''Different?'' Malone said.

Burris nodded. ''Look at it this way,'' he said. His eyes returned to the FBI Agent. ''Suppose you're a congressman,'' he went on, ''and you find evidence of inefficiency in the government.''

''All right,'' Malone said agreeably. He had the feeling that if he waited around a little while everything would make sense, and he was willing to wait. After all, he wasn't on assignment at the moment, and there was nothing pressing waiting for him. He was even between romances.

If he waited long enough, he told himself, Andrew J. Burris might say something worth hearing. He looked attentive and eager. He considered leaning over the desk a little, to look even more eager, but decided against it; Burris might think he looked threatening. There was no telling.

''You're a congressman,'' Burris said, ''and the government is inefficient. You find evidence of it. What do you do?''

Malone blinked and thought for a second. It didn't take any longer than that to come up with the old, old answer. ''I start an investigation,'' he said. ''I get a committee and I talk to a lot of newspaper editors and magazine editors and maybe I

go on television and talk some more, and my committee has a lot of meetings—''

''Exactly,'' Burris said.

''And we talk a lot at the meetings,'' Malone went on, carried away, ''and get a lot of publicity, and we subpoena famous people, just as famous as we can get, except governors or presidents, because you can't—they tried that back in the '50s, and it didn't work very well—and that gives us some more publicity, and then when we have all the publicity we can possibly get—''

''You stop,'' Burris said hurriedly.

''That's right,'' Malone said. ''We stop. And that's what I'd do.''

''Of course, the problem of inefficiency is left exactly where it always was,'' Burris said. ''Nothing's been done about it.''

''Naturally,'' Malone said. ''But think of all the lovely publicity. And all the nice talk. And the subpoenas and committees and everything.''

''Sure,'' Burris said wearily. ''It's happened a thousand times. But, Malone, that's the difference. It isn't happening this time.''

There was a short pause. ''What do you mean?'' Malone said at last.

''This time,'' Burris said, in a tone that sounded almost awed, ''they want to keep it a secret.''

''A secret?'' Malone said, blinking. ''But that's ... that's not the American way.''

Burris shrugged. ''It's un-congressman-like, anyhow,'' he said. ''But that's what they've done. Tiptoed over to me and whispered softly that the thing has to be investigated quietly. Naturally, they didn't give me any orders—but only because they know they can't make one stick. They suggested it pretty strongly.''

''Any reasons?'' Malone said. The whole idea interested him strangely. It was odd—and he found himself almost liking odd cases, lately. That is, he amended hurriedly, if they didn't get too odd.

''Oh, they had reasons, all right,'' Burris said. ''It took a little coaxing, but I managed to pry some loose. You see, every one of them found inefficiency in his own department. And every one knows that other men are investigating inefficiency.''

''Oh,'' Malone said.

''That's right,'' Burris said. ''Every one of them came to me to get me to prove that the goof-ups in his particular department weren't his fault. That covers them in case one of the others happens to light into the department.''

''Well, it must be somebody's fault,'' Malone said.

''It isn't theirs,'' Burris said wearily. ''I ought to know. They told me. At great length, Malone.''

Malone felt a stab of honest pity. ''How many so far?'' he said.

"Six," Burris said. "Four representatives, and two senators."

"Only two?" Malone said.

"Well," Burris said, "the Senate is so much smaller. And, besides, we may get more. As a matter of fact, Senator Lefferts is worth any six representatives all by himself."

"He is?" Malone said, puzzled. Senator Lefferts was not one of his favorite people. Nor, as far as he knew, did the somewhat excitable senator hold any place of honor in the heart of Andrew J. Burris.

"I mean his story," Burris said. "I've never heard anything like it—at least, not since the Bilbo days. And I've only heard about those," he added hurriedly.

"What story?" Malone said. "He talked about inefficiency—"

"Not exactly," Burris said carefully. "He said that somebody was out to get him—him, personally. He said somebody was trying to discredit him by sabotaging all his legislative plans."

"Well," Malone said, feeling that some comment was called for, "three cheers."

"That isn't the point," Burris snapped. "No matter how we felt about Senator Lefferts or his legislative plans, we're sworn to protect him. And he says 'they' are out to get him."

"They?" Malone said.

"You know," Burris said, shrugging. "The great 'they.' The invisible enemies all around, working against him."

"Oh," Malone said. "Paranoid?" He had always thought Senator Lefferts was slightly on the batty side, and the idea of real paranoia didn't come as too much of a surprise. After all, when a man was batty to start out with ... and he even looked like a vampire, Malone thought confusedly.

"As far as paranoia is concerned," Burris said, "I checked with one of our own psych men, and he'll back it up. Lefferts has definite paranoid tendencies, he says."

Malone said, "That's that."

Burris shook his head. "It isn't that simple," he said. "You see, Malone, there's some evidence that somebody is working against him."

"The American public, with any luck at all," Malone said.

"No," Burris said. "An enemy. Somebody sabotaging his plans. Really."

Malone shook his head. "You're crazy," he said.

Burris looked shocked. "Malone, I'm the Director of the FBI," he said. "And if you insist on being disrespectful—"

"Sorry," Malone murmured. "But—"

"I am perfectly sane," Burris said slowly. "It's Senator Lefferts who's crazy. The only trouble is, he has evidence to show he's not."

Malone thought about odd cases, and suddenly wished he were somewhere else. Anywhere else. This one showed sudden signs of developing into something positively bizarre. "I see," he said, wondering if he did.

"After all," Burris said, in a voice that attempted to sound reasonable, "a paranoid has just as much right to be persecuted as anybody else, doesn't he?"

"Sure," Malone said. "Everybody has rights. But what do you want me to do about that?"

"About their rights?" Burris said. "Nothing, Malone. Nothing."

"I mean," Malone said patiently, "about whatever it is that's going on."

Burris took a deep breath. His hands clasped behind his head, and he looked up at the ceiling. He seemed perfectly relaxed. That, Malone knew, was a bad sign. It meant that there was a dirty job coming, a job nobody wanted to do, and one Burris was determined to pass off on him. He sighed and tried to feel resigned.

"Well," the FBI Director said, "the only actual trouble we can pinpoint is that there seem to be a great many errors occurring in the paperwork—more than usual."

"People get tired," Malone said tentatively.

"But computer-secretary calculating machines don't," Burris said. "And that's where the errors are—in the computer-secretaries down in the Senate Office Building. I think you'd better start out there."

"Sure," Malone said sadly.

"See if there's any mechanical or electrical defect in any of those computers," Burris said. "Talk to the computer technicians. Find out what's causing all these errors."

"Yes, sir," Malone said. He was still trying to feel resigned, but he wasn't succeeding very well.

"And if you don't find anything—" Burris began.

"I'll come right back," Malone said instantly.

"No," Burris said. "You keep on looking."

"I do?"

"You do," Burris said. "After all, there has to be something wrong."

"Sure," Malone said, "if you say so. But—"

"There are the interview tapes," Burris said, "and the reports the congressmen brought in. You can go through those."

Malone sighed. "I guess so," he said.

"And there must be thousands of other things to do," Burris said.

"Well—" Malone began cautiously.

"You'll be able to think of them," Burris said heartily. "I know you will. I have

confidence in you, Malone. Confidence.''

''Thanks,'' Malone said sadly.

''You just keep me posted from time to time on what you're doing, and what ideas you get,'' Burris said. ''I'm leaving the whole thing in your hands, Malone, and I'm sure you won't disappoint me.''

''I'll try,'' Malone said.

''I know you will,'' Burris said warmly. ''And no matter how long it takes—I know you'll succeed.''

''No matter how long it takes?'' Malone said hesitantly.

''That's right!'' Burris said. ''You can do it, Malone! You can do it.''

Malone nodded slowly. ''I hope so,'' he said. ''Well, I ... well, I'll start out right away, then.''

He turned. Before he could make another move Burris said: ''Wait!''

Malone turned again, hope in his eyes. ''Yes, sir?'' he said.

''When you leave—'' Burris began, and the hope disappeared ''please do one little favor for me. Just one little favor, because I'm an old, tired man and I'm not used to things any more.''

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''Anything, Chief.''

''Don't call me—''

''Sorry,'' Malone said.

Burris breathed heavily. ''When you leave,'' he said, ''please, please use the door.''

''But—''

''Malone,'' Burris said, ''I've tried. I've really tried. Believe me. I've tried to get used to the fact that you can teleport. But—''

''It's useful,'' Malone said, ''in my work.''

''I can see that,'' Burris said. ''And I don't want you to ... well, to stop doing it. By no means. It's just that it sort of unnerves me, if you see what I mean. No matter how useful it is for the FBI to have an agent who can go instantaneously from one place to another, it unnerves me.'' He sighed. ''I can't get used to seeing you disappear like an over-dried soap bubble, Malone. It does something to me—here.'' He placed a hand directly over his sternum and sighed again.

''I can understand that,'' Malone said. ''It unnerved me, too, the first time I saw it. I thought I was going crazy, when that kid—Mike Fueyo—winked out like a light. But then we got him, and some FBI agents besides me have learned the trick.'' He stopped there, wondering if he'd been tactful. After all, it took a latent ability to learn teleportation, and some people had it, while others didn't. Malone, along with a few other agents, did. Burris evidently didn't—so he couldn't teleport,

no matter how hard he tried or how many lessons he took.

"Well," Burris said, "I'm still unnerved. So ... please, Malone ... when you come in here, or go out, use the door. All right?"

"Yes, sir," Malone said. He turned and went out. As he opened the door, he could almost hear Burris' sigh of relief. Then he banged it shut behind him and, feeling that he might as well continue with his spacebound existence, walked all the way to the elevator, and rode it downstairs to the FBI laboratories.

The labs, highly efficient and divided into dozens of departments, covered several floors. Malone passed through the Fingerprint section, filled with technicians doing strange things to great charts and slides, and frowning over tiny pieces of material and photographs. Then came Forgery Detection, involving many more technicians, many more slides and charts and tiny pieces of things and photographs, and even a witness or two sitting on the white bench at one side and looking lost and somehow civilian. Identification Classified was next, a great barn of a room filled with index files. The real indexes were in the sub-basement; here, on microfilm, were only the basic division. A man was standing in front of one of the files, frowning at it. Malone went on by without stopping.

Cosmetic Surgery Classification came next. Here there were more indexes, and there were also charts and slides. There was an FBI agent sitting on a bench looking bored while two female technicians—classified as O&U for Old and Ugly in Malone's mind—fluttered around him, deciding what disguises were possible, and which of those was indicated for the particular job on hand. Malone waved to the agent, whom he knew very slightly, and went on. He felt vaguely regretful that the FBI couldn't hire prettier girls for the Cosmetic Surgery Division, but the trouble was that pretty girls fell for the agents—and vice versa—and this led to an unfortunate tendency toward only handsome and virile-looking disguises. The O&U Division was unfortunate, he decided, but a necessity.

Chemical Analysis (III) was next. The Chemical Analysis section was scattered over several floors, with the first stages up above. Division III, Malone remembered, was devoted to non-poisonous substances—like clay or sand found in boots or trouser cuffs, cigar ashes and such. They were placed on the same floor as Fingerprints to allow free and frequent passage between the sections on the problems of plastic prints—made in putty or like substances—and visible prints, made when the hand is covered with a visible substance like blood, ketchup or glue.

Malone found what he was looking for at the very end of the floor. It was the Computer Section, a large room filled with humming, clacking and buzzing machines of an ancient vintage, muttering to themselves as they worked, and newer machines which were smaller and more silent. Lights were lighting and bells were ringing softly, relays were relaying and the whole room was a gigantic maze of calculating and control machines. What space wasn't filled by the machines them-

selves was filled by workbenches, all littered with an assortment of gears, tubes, spare relays, transistors, wires, rods, bolts, resistors and all the other paraphernalia used in building the machines and repairing them. Beyond the basic room were other, smaller rooms, each assigned to a particular kind of computer work.

The narrow aisles were choked here and there with men who looked up as Malone passed by, but most of them gave him one quick glance and went back to work. A few didn't even do that, but went right on concentrating on their jobs. Malone headed for a man working all alone in front of a workbench, frowning down at a complicated-looking mechanism that seemed to have neither head nor tail, and prodding at it with a long, thin screwdriver. The man was thin, too, but not very long; he was a little under average height, and he had straight black hair, thick-lensed glasses and a studious expression, even when he was frowning. He looked as if the mechanism were a student who had cut too many classes, and he was being kindly but firm with it.

Malone managed to get to the man's side, and coughed discreetly. There was no response.

"Fred?" he said.

The screwdriver waggled a little. Malone wasn't quite sure that the man was breathing.

"Fred Mitchell," he said.

Mitchell didn't look up. Another second passed.

"Hey," Malone said. Then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Fred," he said in a loud, reasonable-sounding voice, "the State Department's translator has started to talk pig-Latin."

Mitchell straightened up as if somebody had jabbed him with a pin. The screwdriver waved wildly in the air for a second, and then pointed at Malone. "That's impossible," Mitchell said in a flat, precise voice. "Simply impossible. It doesn't have a pig-Latin circuit. It can't possibly—" He blinked and seemed to see Malone for the first time. "Oh," he said. "Hello, Malone. What can I do for you?"

Malone smiled, feeling a little victorious at having got through the Mitchell armor, which was almost impregnable when there was a job in hand. "I've been standing here talking to you for some time."

"Oh, have you?" Mitchell said. "I was busy." That, obviously, explained that. Malone shrugged.

"I want you to help me check over some calculators, Fred," he said. "We've had some reports that some of the government machines are out of kilter, and I'd like you to go over them for me."

"Out of kilter?" Fred Mitchell said. "No, you can forget about it. It's absolutely unnecessary to make a check—believe me. Absolutely. Forget it." He smiled sud-

denly. "I suppose it's some kind of a joke, isn't it?" he said, just a trifle uncertainly. Fred Mitchell's world, while pleasant, did not include much humor, Malone knew. "It's supposed to be funny," he said in the same flat, precise voice.

"It isn't funny," Malone said.

Fred sighed. "Then they're obviously lying," he said, "and that's all there is to it. Why bother me with it?"

"Certainly," Fred said. He looked at the machinery with longing.

Malone took a breath. "How do you know?" he said.

Fred sighed. "It's perfectly obvious," he said in a patient tone. "Since the State Department translator has no pig-Latin circuit, it can't possibly be talking pig-Latin. I will admit that such a circuit would be relatively easy to build, though it would have no utility as far as I can see. Except, of course, for a joke." He paused. "Joke?" he said, in a slightly uneasy tone.

"Sure," Malone said. "Joke."

Mitchell looked relieved. "Very well, then," he began. "Since—"

"Wait a minute," Malone said. "The pig-Latin is a joke. That's right. But I'm not talking about the pig-Latin."

"You're not?" Mitchell asked, surprised.

"No," Malone said.

Mitchell frowned. "But you said—" he began.

"A joke," Malone said. "You were perfectly right. The pig-Latin is a joke." He waited for Fred's expression to clear, and then added: "But what I want to talk to you about isn't."

"It sounds very confused," Fred said after a pause. "Not at all the sort of thing that ... that usually goes on."

"You have no idea," Malone said. "It's about the political machines, all right, but it isn't anything as simple as pig-Latin." He explained, taking his time over it.

When he had finished, Fred was nodding his head slowly. "I see," he said. "I understand just what you want me to do."

"Good," Malone said.

"I'll take a team over to the Senate Office Building," Fred said, "and check the computer-secretaries there. That way, you see, I'll be able to do a full running check on them without taking any one machine out of operation for too long."

"Sure," Malone said.

"And it shouldn't take long," Fred went on, "to find out just what the trouble is." He looked very confident.

"How long?" Malone asked.

Fred shrugged. "Oh," he said, "five or six days."

Malone repressed an impulse to scream. "Days?" he said. "I mean ... well, look, Fred, it's important. Very important. Can't you do the job any faster?"

Fred gave a little sigh. "Checking and repairing all those machines," he said, "is an extremely complex job. Sometimes, Malone, I don't think you realize quite how complex, and how delicate a job it is to deal with such a high-order machine. Why—"

"Wait a minute," Malone said. "Check and repair them?"

"Of course," Fred said.

"But I don't want them repaired," Malone said. Seeing the look of horror on Fred's face, he added hastily: "I only want a report from you on what's wrong, whether they are actually making errors or not. And if they are making errors, just what's making them do it. And just what kind of errors. See?"

Fred nodded very slowly. "But I can't just ... just leave them there," he said piteously. "In ... pieces and everything. It isn't right, Malone. It just isn't right."

"Well, then," Malone said with energy, "you go right ahead and repair them, if you want to. Fix 'em all up. But you can do that after you make the report to me, can't you?"

"I—" Fred hesitated. "I had planned to check and repair each machine on an individual basis—"

"The Congress can allow for a short suspension," Malone said. "Anyhow, they can now—or as soon as I get the word to them. Suppose you check all the machines first, and then get around to the repair work."

"It's not the best way," Fred demurred.

Malone discovered that it was his turn to sigh. "Is it the fastest?" he said.

Fred nodded.

"Then it's the best," Malone said. "How long?"

Fred rolled his eyes to the ceiling and calculated silently for a second. "Tomorrow morning," he announced, returning his gaze to Malone.

"Fine," Malone said. "Fine."

"But—"

"Never mind the buts," Malone said hurriedly. "I'll count on hearing from you tomorrow morning."

"Oh—" Fred said. "All right."

"And if it looks like sabotage," Malone added, "if the errors aren't caused by normal wear and tear on the machines—you let me know right away. Phone me. Don't waste an instant."

"I'll ... I'll start right away," Fred said heavily. He looked sadly at the mechanism he had been working on, and put his screwdriver down next to it. It looked

to Malone as if he were putting flowers on the grave of a dear departed. "I'll get a team together," Fred added. He gave the mechanism and screwdriver one last fond parting look.

Malone looked after him for a second, thinking of nothing in particular, and then turned in the opposite direction and headed back toward the elevator. As he walked, he began to feel more and more pleased with himself. After all, he'd gotten the investigation started, hadn't he?

And now all he had to do was go back to his office and read some reports and listen to some interview tapes, and then he could go home.

The reports and the interview tapes didn't exactly sound like fun, Malone thought, but at the same time they seemed fairly innocent. He would work his way through them grimly, and maybe he would even indulge his most secret vice and smoke a cigar or two to make the work pass more pleasantly. Soon enough, he told himself, they would be finished with.

Sometimes, though, he regretted the reputation he'd gotten. It had been bad enough in the old days—the pre-1971 days when Malone had thought he was just lucky. Burris had called him a Boy Wonder then, when he'd cracked three difficult cases in a row. Being just lucky had made it a little tough to live with the Boy Wonder label—after all, Malone thought, it wasn't actually as if he'd done anything.

But since 1971 and the case of the Telepathic Spy, things had gotten worse. Much worse. Now Malone wasn't just lucky any more. Instead, he could teleport and he could even foretell the future a little, in a dim sort of way. He'd caught the Telepathic Spy that way, and when the case of the Teleporting Juvenile Delinquents had come up he'd been assigned to that one too, and he'd cracked it. Now Burris seemed to think of him as a kind of god, and gave him all the tough dirty jobs.

And if he wasn't just lucky any more, Malone couldn't think of himself as a Fearless, Heroic FBI Agent, either. He just wasn't the type. He was—well, talented. That was the word, he told himself: talented. He had all these talents and they made him look like something spectacular to Burris and the other FBI men. But he wasn't, really. He hadn't done anything really tough to get his talents; they'd just happened to him.

Nobody, though, seemed to believe that. He heaved a little sigh and stepped into the waiting elevator.

There were, after all, he thought, compensations. He'd had some good times, and the talents did come in handy. And he did have his pick of the vacation schedule lately. And he'd met some lovely girls—

And besides, he told himself savagely as the elevator shot upward, he wasn't going to do anything except return to his office and read some reports and listen to some tapes. And then he was going to go home and sleep all night, peacefully. And in the morning Mitchell was going to call him up and tell him that the com-

puter-secretaries needed nothing more than a little repair. He'd say they were getting old, and he'd be a little pathetic about it; but it wouldn't be anything serious. Malone would send out orders to get the machines repaired, and that would be that. And then the next case would be something both normal and exciting, like a bank robbery or a kidnapping involving a gorgeous blonde who would be so grateful to Malone that—

He had stepped out of the elevator and gone down the corridor without noticing it. He pushed at his own office door and walked into the outer room. The train of thought he had been following was very nice, and sounded very attractive indeed, he told himself.

Unfortunately, he didn't believe it. His prescient ability, functioning with its usual efficient aplomb, told Malone that things would not be better, or simpler, in the morning. They would be worse, and more complicated.

They would be quite a lot worse.

And, as usual, that prescience was perfectly accurate.

**II**

The telephone, Malone realized belatedly, had had a particularly nasty-sounding ring. He might have known it would be bad news.

As a matter of fact, he told himself sadly, he had known.

"Nothing at all wrong?" he said into the mouthpiece. "Not with any of the computers?" He blinked. "Not even one of them?"

"Not a thing," Mitchell said. "I'll be sending a report up to you in a little while. You read it; we put them through every test, and it's all detailed there."

"I'm sure you were very thorough," Malone said helplessly.

"Of course we were," Mitchell said. "Of course. And the machines passed every single test. Every one. Malone, it was beautiful."

"Goody," Malone said at random. "But there's got to be something—"

"There is, Malone," Fred said. "There is. I think there's definitely something odd going on. Something funny. I mean peculiar, not humorous."

"I thought so," Malone put in.

"Right," Fred said. "Malone, try and relax. This is a hard thing to say, and it must be even harder to hear. But—"

"Tell me," Malone said. "Who's dead? Who's been killed?"

"I know it's tough, Malone," Fred went on.

"Is everybody dead?" Malone said. "It can't be just one person, not from that tone in your voice. Has somebody assassinated the entire Senate? Or the President and his Cabinet? Or—"

"It's nothing like that, Malone," Fred said, in a tone that implied that such occurrences were really rather minor. "It's the machines."

"The machines?"

"That's right," Fred said grimly. "After we checked them over and found they were in good shape, I asked for samples of both the input and the output of each machine. I wanted to do a thorough job."

"Congratulations," Malone said. "What happened?"

Fred took a deep breath. "They don't agree," he said.

"They don't?" Malone said. The phrase sounded as if it meant something momentous, but he couldn't quite figure out what. In a minute, he thought confusedly, it would come to him. But did he want it to?

"They definitely do not agree," Fred was saying. "The correlation is erratic; it makes no statistical sense. Malone, there are two possibilities."

"Tell me about them," Malone said. He was beginning to feel relieved. To Fred, the malfunction of a machine was more serious than the murder of the entire Congress. But Malone couldn't quite bring himself to feel that way about things.

"First," Fred said in a tense tone, "it's possible that the technicians feeding information to the machines are making all kinds of mistakes."

Malone nodded at the phone. "That sounds possible," he said. "Which ones?"

"All of them," Fred said. "They're all making errors—and they're all making about the same number of errors. There don't seem to be any real peaks or valleys, Malone; everybody's doing it."

Malone thought of the Varsity Drag and repressed the thought. "A bunch of fumblebums," he said. "All fumbling alike. It does sound unlikely, but I guess it's possible. We'll get after them right away, and—"

"Wait," Fred said. "There is a second possibility."

"Oh," Malone said.

"Maybe they aren't mistakes," Fred said. "Maybe the technicians are deliberately feeding the machine with wrong answers."

Malone hated to admit, even to himself, but that answer sounded a lot more probable. Machine technicians weren't exactly picked off the streets at random; they were highly trained for their work, and the idea of a whole crew of them starting to fumble at once, in a big way, was a little hard to swallow.

The idea of all of them sabotaging the machines they worked on, Malone thought, was a tough one to take, too. But it had the advantage of making some sense. People, he told himself dully, will do nutty things deliberately. It's harder to think of them doing the same nutty things without knowing it.

"Well," he said at last, "however it turns out, we'll get to the bottom of it. Frankly, I think it's being done on purpose."

"So do I," Fred said. "And when you find out just who's making the technicians do such things—when you find out who gives them their orders—you let me know."

"Let you know?" Malone said. "But—"

"Any man who would give false data to a perfectly innocent computer," Fred said savagely, "would ... would—" For a second he was apparently lost for comparisons. Then he finished: "Would kill his own mother." He paused a second and added, in an even more savage voice: "And then lie about it!"

The image on the screen snapped off, and Malone sat back in his chair and sighed. He spent a few minutes regretting that he hadn't chosen, early in life, to be a missionary to the Fiji Islanders, or possibly simply a drunken bum without any trouble, and then the report Mitchell had mentioned arrived. Malone picked it up without much eagerness, and began going through it carefully.

It was beautifully typed and arranged; somebody on Mitchell's team had obviously been up all night at the job. Malone admired the work, without being able to get enthusiastic about the contents. Like all technical reports, it tended to be boring and just a trifle obscure to someone who wasn't completely familiar with the field involved. Malone and cybernetics were not exactly bosom buddies, and by the time he finished reading through the report he was suffering from an extreme case of ennui.

There were no new clues in the report, either; Mitchell's phone conversation had covered all of the main points. Malone put the sheaf of papers down on his desk and looked at them for a minute as if he expected an answer to leap out from the pile and greet him with a glad cry, but nothing happened. Unfortunately, he had to do some more work.

The obvious next step was to start checking on the technicians who were working on the machines. Malone determined privately that he would give none of his reports to Fred Mitchell; he didn't like the idea of being responsible for murder, and that was the least Fred would do to someone who confused his precious calculators.

He picked up the phone, punched for the Records Division, and waited until a bald, middle-aged face appeared. He asked the face to send up the dossiers of the technicians concerned to his office. The face nodded.

"You want them right away?" it said in a mild, slightly scratchy voice.

"Sooner than right away," Malone said.

"They're coming up by messenger," the voice said.

Malone nodded and broke the connection. The technicians had, of course, been investigated by the FBI before they'd been hired, but it wouldn't do any harm to check them out again. He felt grateful that he wouldn't have to do all that work himself; he would just go through the dossiers and assign field agents to the actual checking when he had a picture of what might need to be checked.

He sighed again and leaned back in his chair. He put his feet up on the desk, remembered that he was entirely alone, and swung them down again. He fished in a private compartment in his top desk drawer, drew out a cigar and unwrapped it. Putting his feet back on the desk, he lit the cigar, drew in a cloud of smoke, and lapsed into deep thought.

Cigar smoke billowed around him, making strange, fantastic shapes in the air of the office. Malone puffed away, frowning slightly and trying to force the puzzle he was working on to make some sense.

It certainly looked as though something were going on, he thought. But, for the life of him, he couldn't figure out just what it was. After all, what could be anybody's purpose in goofing up a bunch of calculators the way they had? Of course, the whole thing could be a series of accidents, but the series was a pretty long one, and made Malone suspicious to start with. It was easier to assume that the goof-ups were being done deliberately.

Unfortunately, they didn't make much sense as sabotage, either.

Senator Deeds, for instance, had sent out a ten-thousand-copy form letter to his constituents, blasting an Administration power bill in extremely strong language, and asking for some comments on the Deeds-Hartshorn Air Ownership Bill, a pending piece of legislation that provided for private, personal ownership, based on land title, to the upper stratosphere—with a strong hint that rights of passage no longer applied without some recompense to the owner of the air. Naturally, Deeds had filed the original with a computer-secretary to turn out ten thousand duplicate copies, and the machine had done so, folding the copies, slipping them into addressed envelopes and sending them out under the senator's franking stamp.

The addresses on the envelopes, however, had not been those of the senator's supporters. The letter had been sent to ten thousand stockholders in major airline companies, and the senator's head was still ringing from the force of the denunciatory letters, telegrams and telephone calls he'd been getting.

And then there was Representative Follansbee of South Dakota. A set of news releases on the proposed Follansbee Waterworks Bill contained the statement that the artificial lake which Follansbee proposed in the Black Hills country "be formed by controlled atomic power blasts, and filled with water obtained from collecting the tears of widows and orphans."

Newsmen who saw this release immediately checked the bill. The wording was exactly the same. Follansbee claimed that the "widows and orphans" phrase had appeared in his speech on the bill, and not in the proposed bill itself. "It's completely absurd," he said, with commendable calm, "to consider this method of filling an artificial lake." Unfortunately, the absurdity was now contained in the bill, which would have to go back to committee for redefinition, and probably

wouldn't come up again in the present session of Congress. Judging from the amount of laughter that had greeted the error when it had come to light, Malone privately doubted whether any amount of redefinition was going to save it from a landslide defeat.

Representative Keller of Idaho had made a speech which contained so many errors in fact that newspaper editorials, and his enemies on the floor of Congress, cut him to pieces with ease and pleasure. Keller complained of his innocence and said he'd gotten his facts from a computer-secretary, but this didn't save him. His re-election was a matter for grave concern in his own party, and the opposition was, naturally, tickled. They would not, Malone thought, dare to be tickled pink.

And these were not the only casualties. They were the most blatant foul-ups, but there were others, such as the mistake in numbering of a House Bill that resulted in a two-month delay during which the opposition to the bill raised enough votes to defeat it on the floor. Communications were diverted or lost or scrambled in small ways that made for confusion—including, Malone recalled the perfectly horrible mixup that resulted when a freshman senator, thinking he was talking to his girlfriend on a blanked-vision circuit, discovered he was talking to his wife.

The flow of information was being blocked by bottlenecks that suddenly existed where there had never been bottlenecks before.

And it wasn't only the computers, Malone knew. He remembered the reports the senators and representatives had made. Someone forgot to send an important message here, or sent one too soon over there. Both courses were equally disturbing, and both resulted in more snarl-ups. Reports that should have been sent in weeks before arrived too late; reports meant for the eyes of only one man were turned out in triplicate and passed all over the offices of Congress.

Each snarl-up was a little one. But, together, they added up to inefficiency of a kind and extent that hadn't been seen, Malone told himself with some wonder, since the Harding administration fifty years before.

And there didn't seem to be anyone to blame anything on.

Malone thought hopefully of sabotage, infiltration and mass treason, but it didn't make him feel much better. He puffed out some more smoke and frowned at nothing.

There was a knock at the door of his office.

Speedily and guiltily, he swung his feet off the desk and snatched the cigar out of his mouth. He jammed it into a deep ashtray and put the ashtray back into his desk drawer. He locked the drawer, waved ineffectively at the clouds of smoke that surrounded him, and said in a resigned voice: "Come in."

The door opened. A tall, solidly built man stood there, wearing a fringe of beard and a cheerful expression. The man had an enormous amount of muscle distributed more or less evenly over his chunky body, and a potbelly that looked

as if he had swallowed a globe of the world. In addition, he was smoking a cigarette and letting out little puffs of smoke, rather like a toy locomotive.

"Well, well," Malone said, brushing feebly at the smoke that still wreathed him faintly. "If it isn't Thomas Boyd, the FBI's answer to Nero Wolfe."

"And if the physique holds true, you're Sherlock Holmes, I suppose," Boyd said.

Malone shook his head, thinking sadly of his father and the cigar. "Not exactly," he said. "Not ex—" And then it came to him. It wasn't that he was ashamed of smoking cigars like his father, exactly—but cigars just weren't right for a fearless, dedicated FBI agent. And he had just thought of a way to keep Boyd from knowing what he'd been doing. "That's a hell of a cigarette you're smoking, by the way," he said.

Boyd looked at it. "It is?" he said.

"Sure is," Malone said, hoping he sounded sufficiently innocent. "Smells like a cigar or something."

Boyd sniffed the air for a second, his face wrinkled. Then he looked down at his cigarette again. "You're right, Ken. It does smell like a cigar." He came over to Malone's desk, looked around for an ashtray and didn't find one, and finally went to the window and tossed the cigarette out into the Washington breeze. "How are things, anyhow, Ken?" he said.

"Things are confused," Malone said. "Aren't they always?"

Boyd came back to the desk and sat down in a chair at one side of it. He put his elbow on the desk. "Sure they are," he said. "I'm confused myself, as a matter of fact. Only I think I know where I can get some help."

"Really?" Malone said.

Boyd nodded. "Burris told me I might be able to get some information from a certain famous and highly respected person," he said.

"Well, well," Malone said. "Who?"

"You," Boyd said.

"Oh," Malone said, trying to look disappointed, flattered and modest all at the same time. "Well," he went on after a second, "anything I can do—"

"Burris thought you might have some answers," Boyd said.

"Burris is getting optimistic in his old age," Malone said. "I don't even have many questions."

Boyd nodded. "Well," he said, "you know this California thing?"

"Sure I do," Malone said. "You're looking into the resignation out there, aren't you?"

"Senator Burley," Boyd said. "That's right. But Senator Burley's resignation isn't all of it, by any means."

"It isn't?" Malone said, trying to sound interested.

"Not at all," Boyd said. "It goes a lot deeper than it looks on the surface. In the past year, Ken, five senators have announced their resignations from the Senate of the United States. It isn't exactly a record—"

"It sounds like a record," Malone said.

"Well," Boyd said, "there was 1860 and the Civil War, when a whole lot of senators and representatives resigned all at once."

"Oh," Malone said. "But there isn't any Civil War going on now. At least," he added, "I haven't heard of any."

"That's what makes it so funny," Boyd said. "Of course, Senator Burley said it was ill health, and so did two others, while Senator Davidson said it was old age."

"Well," Malone said, "people do get old. And sick."

"Sure," Boyd said. "The only trouble is—" He paused. "Ken," he said, "do you mind if I smoke? I mean, do you mind the smell of cigars?"

"Mind?" Malone said. "Not at all. Not at all." He blinked. "Besides," he added, "maybe this one won't smell like a cigar."

"Well, the last one did," Boyd said. He took a cigarette out of a pack in his pocket, and lit it. He sniffed. "You know," he said, "You're right. This one doesn't."

"I told you," Malone said. "Must have been a bad cigarette. Spoiled or something."

"I guess so," Boyd said vaguely. "But about these retirements—the FBI wanted me to look into it because of Burley's being mixed up with the space program scandal last year. Remember?

"Vaguely," Malone said. "I was busy last year."

"Sure you were," Boyd said. "We were both busy getting famous and well-known."

Malone grinned. "Go on with the story," he said.

Boyd puffed at his cigarette. "Anyhow, we couldn't find anything really wrong," he said. "Three senators retiring because of ill health, one because of old age. And Farnsworth, the youngest. He had a nervous breakdown."

"I didn't hear about it," Malone said.

Boyd shrugged. "We hushed it up," he said. "But Farnsworth's got delusions of persecution. He apparently thinks somebody's out to get him. As a matter of fact, he thinks everybody's out to get him."

"Now that," Malone said, "sounds familiar."

Boyd leaned back a little more in his chair. "Here's the funny thing, though," he said. "The others all act as if they're suspicious of everybody who talks to them. Not anything obvious, you understand. Just—worried. Apprehensive. Always look-

ing at you out of the corners of their eyes. That kind of thing.''

Malone thought of Senator Lefferts, who was also suffering from delusions of persecution—delusions that had real evidence to back them up. ''It does sound funny,'' he said cautiously.

''Well, I reported everything to Burris,'' Boyd went on. ''And he said you were working on something similar, and we might as well pool our resources.''

''Here we go again,'' Malone said. He took a deep breath, filling his nostrils with what remained of the cigar odor in the room, and felt more peaceful. Quickly, he told Boyd about what had been happening in Congress. ''It seems pretty obvious,'' he finished, ''that there is some kind of a tie-up between the two cases.''

''Maybe it's obvious,'' Boyd said, ''But it is just a little bit odd. Fun and games. You know, Ken, Burris was right.''

''How?'' Malone said.

''He said everything was all mixed up,'' Boyd went on. ''He told me the country was going to Rome in a handbasket, or something like that.''

Wondering vaguely if Burris had really been predicting mass religious conversions, Malone nodded silently.

''And he's right,'' Boyd said. ''Look at the newspapers. Everything's screwy lately.''

''Everything always is screwy,'' Malone said.

''Not like now,'' Boyd said. ''So many big-shot gangsters have been killed lately we might as well bring back Prohibition. And the labor unions are so busy with internal battles that they haven't had time to go on strike for over a year.''

''Is that bad?'' Malone said.

Boyd shrugged. ''God knows,'' he said. ''But it's sure confusing as all hell.''

''And now,'' Malone said, ''with all that going on—''

''The Congress of the United States decides to go off its collective rocker,'' Boyd finished. ''Exactly.'' He stared down at his cigarette for a minute with a morose and pensive expression on his face. He looked, Malone thought, like Henry VIII trying to decide what to do about all these here wives.

Then he looked up at Malone. ''Ken,'' he said in a strained voice, ''there seem to be a lot of nutty cases lately.''

Malone considered. ''No,'' he said at last. ''It's just that when a nutty one comes along, we get it.''

''That's what I mean,'' Boyd said. ''I wonder why that is.''

Malone shrugged. ''It takes a thief to catch a thief,'' he said.

''But these aren't thieves,'' Boyd said. ''I mean—they're just nutty.'' He paused. ''Oh,'' he said.

"And, two thieves are better than one," Malone said.

"Anyhow," Boyd said with a small, gusty sigh, "it's company."

"Sure," Malone said.

Boyd looked for an ashtray, failed again to find one, and walked over to flip a second cigarette out onto Washington. He came back to his chair, sat down, and said: "What's our next step, Ken?"

Malone considered carefully. "First," he said finally, "we'll start assuming something. We'll start assuming that there is some kind of organization behind all this—behind all the senators' resignations and everything like that."

"It sounds like a big assumption," Boyd said.

Malone shook his head. "It isn't really," he said. "After all, we can't figure it's the work of one person: it's too widespread for that. And it's silly to assume that everything's accidental."

"All right," Boyd said equably. "It's an organization."

"Trying to subvert the United States," Malone went on. "Reducing everything to chaos. And that brings in everything else, Tom. That brings in the unions and the gang wars and everything."

Boyd blinked. "How?" he said.

"Obvious," Malone said. "Strife brought on by internal confusion—that's what's going on all over. It's the same pattern. And if we assume an organization trying to jam up the United States, it even makes sense." He leaned back and beamed.

"Sure it makes sense," Boyd said. "But who's the organization?"

Malone shrugged.

"If I were doing the picking," Boyd said, "I'd pick the Russians. Or the Chinese. Or both. Probably both."

"It's a possibility," Malone said. "Anyhow, if it's sabotage, who else would be interested in sabotaging the United States? There's some Russian or Chinese organization fouling up Congress, and the unions, and the gangs. Come to think of it, why the gangs? It seems to me that if you left the professional gangsters strong, it would do even more to foul things up."

"Who knows?" Boyd said. "Maybe they're trying to get rid of American gangsters so they can import some of their own."

"That doesn't make any sense," Malone said, "but I'll think about it. In the meantime, we have one more interesting question."

"We do?" Boyd said.

"Sure we do," Malone said. "The question is: How?"

Boyd said: "Hm-m-m." Then there was silence for a little while.

"How are the saboteurs doing all this?" Malone said. "It just doesn't seem very

probable that all the technicians in the Senate Office Building, for instance, are spies. It makes even less sense that the labor unions are composed mostly of spies. Or, for that matter, the Mafia and the organizations like it. What would spies be doing in the Mafia?''

''Learning Italian,'' Boyd said instantly.

''Don't be silly,'' Malone said. ''If there were that many spies in this country, the Russians wouldn't have to fight at all. They could vote the Communists into power—and by a nice big landslide, too.''

''Wait a minute,'' Boyd said. ''If there aren't so many spies, then how is all this getting done?''

Malone beamed. ''That's the question,'' he said. ''And I think I have the answer.''

''You do?'' Boyd said. After a second he said: ''Oh, no.''

''Suppose you tell me,'' Malone said.

Boyd opened his mouth. Nothing emerged. He shut it. A second passed and he opened it again. ''Magic?'' he said weakly.

''Not exactly,'' Malone said cheerfully. ''But you're getting warm.''

Boyd shut his eyes. ''I'm not going to stand for it,'' he announced. ''I'm not going to take any more.''

''Any more what?'' Malone said. ''Tell me what you have in mind.''

''I won't even consider it,'' Boyd said. ''It haunts me. It gets into my dreams. Now, look, Ken: I can't even see a pitchfork any more without thinking of Greek letters.''

Malone took a breath. ''Which Greek letter?'' he said.

''You know very well,'' Boyd said. ''What a pitchfork looks like. Psi. And I'm not even going to think about it.''

''Well,'' Malone said equably, ''you won't have to. If you'd rather start with the Russian spy end of things, you can do that.''

''What I'd rather do,'' Boyd said, ''is resign.''

''Next year,'' Malone said instantly. ''For now, you can wait around until the dossiers come up—they're for the Senate Office Building technicians, and they're on the way. You can go over them, and start checking on any known Russian agents in the country for contacts. You can also start checking on the dossiers, and in general for any hanky-panky.''

Boyd blinked. ''Hanky-panky?'' he said.

''It's a perfectly good word,'' Malone said, offended. ''Or two words. Anyhow, you can start on that end, and not worry about anything else.''

''It's going to haunt me,'' Boyd said.

"Well," Malone said, "eat lots of ectoplasm and get enough sleep, and everything will be fine. After all, I'm going to have to do the real end of the work—the psionics end. I may be wrong, but—"

He was interrupted by the phone. He flicked the switch and Andrew J. Burris' face appeared on the screen.

"Malone," Burris said instantly, "I just got a complaint from the State Department that ties in with your work. Their translator has been acting up."

Malone couldn't say anything for a minute.

"Malone," Burris went on. "I said—"

"I heard you," Malone said. "And it doesn't have one."

"It doesn't have one what?" Burris said.

"A pig-Latin circuit," Malone said. "What else?"

Burris' voice was very calm. "Malone," he said, "what does pig-Latin have to do with anything?"

"You said—"

"I said one of the State Department translators was acting up," Burris said. "If you want details—"

"I don't think I can stand them," Malone said.

"Some of the Russian and Chinese releases have come through with the meaning slightly altered," Burris went on doggedly. "And I want you to check on it right away. I—"

"Thank God," Malone said.

Burris blinked. "What?"

"Never mind," Malone said. "Never mind. I'm glad you told me, Chief. I'll get to work on it right away, and—"

"You do that, Malone," Burris said. "And stop calling me Chief! Do I look like an Indian? Do I have feathers in my hair?"

"Anything," Malone said grandly, "is possible." He broke the connection in a hurry.

### III

The summer sun beat down on the white city of Washington, D. C. as if it had mistaken its instructions slightly, and was convinced that the city had been put down somewhere in the Sahara. The sun seemed confused, Malone thought. If this were the Sahara, obviously there was no reason whatever for the Potomac to be running through it. The sun was doing its best to correct this small error, however, by exerting even more heat in a valiant attempt to dry up the river.

Its attempt was succeeding, at least partially. The Potomac was still there, but

quite a lot of it was not in the river bed any more. Instead, it had gone into the air, which was so humid by now that Malone was willing to swear that it was splashing into his lungs at every inhalation. Resisting an impulse to try the breast-stroke, he stood in the full glare of the straining sun, just outside the Senate Office Building. He looked across at the Capitol, squinting his eyes manfully against the glare of its dome in the brightness.

The Capitol was, at any rate, some relief from the sight of Thomas Boyd and a group of agents busily grilling two technicians. That was going on in the Senate Office Building, and Malone had come over to watch the proceedings. Everything had been set up in what Malone considered the most complicated fashion possible. A big room had been turned into a projection chamber, and films were being run off over and over. The films, taken by hidden cameras watching the computer-secretaries, had caught two technicians red-handed punching errors into the machines. Boyd had leaped on this evidence, and he and his crew were showing the movies to the technicians and questioning them under bright lights in an effort to break down their resistance.

But it didn't look as though they were going to have any more success than the sun was having, turning Washington into the Sahara. After all, Malone told himself, wiping his streaming brow, there were no Pyramids in Washington. He tried to discover whether that made any sense, but it was too much work. He went back to thinking about Boyd.

The technicians were sticking to their original stories, that the mistakes had been honest ones. It sounded like a sensible idea to Malone; after all, people did make mistakes. And the FBI didn't have a single shred of evidence to prove that the technicians were engaged in deliberate sabotage. But Boyd wasn't giving up. Over and over he got the technicians to repeat their stories, looking for discrepancies or slips. Over and over he ran off the films of their mistakes, looking for some clue, some shred of evidence.

Even the sight of the Capitol, Malone told himself sadly, was better than any more of Boyd's massive investigation techniques.

He had come out to do some thinking. He believed, in spite of a good deal of evidence to the contrary, that his best ideas came to him while walking. At any rate, it was a way of getting away from four walls and from the prying eyes and anxious looks of superiors. He sighed gently, crammed his hat onto his head and started out.

Only a maniac, he reflected, would wear a hat on a day like the one he was swimming through. But the people who passed him as he trudged onward to no particular destination didn't seem to notice; they gave him a fairly wide berth, and seemed very polite, but that wasn't because they thought he was nuts, Malone knew. It was because they knew he was an FBI man.

That was the result of an FBI regulation. All agents had to wear hats. Malone wasn't sure why, and his thinking on the matter had only dredged up the idea that you had to have a hat in case somebody asked you to keep something under it. But the FBI was firm about its rulings. No matter what the weather, an agent wore a hat. Malone thought bitterly that he might just as well wear a red, white and blue luminous sign that said FBI in great winking letters, and maybe a hooting siren, too. Still, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was not supposed to be a secret organization—no matter what occasional critics might say. And the hats, at least as long as the weather remained broiling, were enough proof of that for anybody.

Malone could feel water collecting under his hat and soaking his head. He removed the hat quickly, wiped his head with a handkerchief and replaced the hat, feeling as if he had become incognito for a few seconds. The hat was back on now, feeling official but terrible, and about the same was true of the fully-loaded Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum revolver which hung in his shoulder holster. The harness chafed at his shoulder and chest and the weight of the gun itself was an added and unwelcome burden.

But even without the gun and the hat, Malone did not feel exactly chipper. His shirt and undershirt were no longer two garments, but one, welded together by seamless sweat and plastered heavily and not too skillfully to his skin. His trouser legs clung damply to calves and thighs, rubbing as he walked, and at the knees each trouser leg attached and detached itself with the unpleasant regularity of a wet bastinado. Inside Malone's shoes, his socks were completely awash, and he seemed to squish as he walked. It was hard to tell, but there seemed to be a small fish in his left shoe. It might, he told himself, be no more than a pebble or a wrinkle in his sock. But he was willing to swear that it was swimming upstream.

And the forecast, he told himself bitterly, was for continued warm.

He forced himself to take his mind off his own troubles and get back to the troubles of the FBI in general, such as the problem at hand. It was an effort, but he frowned and kept walking, and within a block he was concentrating again on the psi powers.

Psi, he told himself, was behind the whole mess. In spite of Boyd's horrified refusal to believe such a thing, Malone was sure of it. Three years ago, of course, he wouldn't have considered the notion either. But since then a great many things had happened, and his horizons had widened. After all, capturing a double handful of totally insane, if perfectly genuine telepaths, from asylums all over the country, was enough by itself to widen quite a few stunned horizons. And then, later, there had been the gang of juvenile delinquents. They had been perfectly normal juvenile delinquents, stealing cars and bopping a stray policeman or two. It just happened, though, that they had solved the secret of instantaneous teleportation, too. This made them just a trifle unusual.

In capturing them, Malone, too, had learned the teleportation secret. Unlike Boyd, he thought, or Burris, the idea of psionic power didn't bother him much. After all, the psionic spectrum—if it was a spectrum at all—was just as much a natural phenomenon as gravity, or magnetism.

It was just a little hard for some people to get used to.

And, of course, he didn't fully understand how it worked, or why. This put him in the position, he told himself, of an Australian aborigine. He tried to imagine an Australian aborigine in a hat on a hot day, decided the aborigine would have too much sense, and got back off the subject again.

However, he thought grimly, there was this Australian aborigine. And he had a magnifying glass, which he'd picked up from the wreck of some ship. Using that—assuming that experience, or a friendly missionary, taught him how—he could manage to light a fire, using the sun's thermonuclear processes to do the job. Malone doubted that the aborigine knew anything about thermonuclear processes, but he could start a fire with them.

As a matter of fact, he told himself, the aborigine didn't understand oxidation, either. But he could use that fire, when he got it going. In spite of his lack of knowledge, the aborigine could use that nice, hot, burning fire ...

Hurriedly, Malone pried his thoughts away from aborigines and heat, and tried to focus his mind elsewhere. He didn't understand psionic processes, he thought; but then, nobody did, really, as far as he knew. But he could use them.

And, obviously, somebody else could use them, too.

Only what kind of force was being used? What kind of psionic force would it take to make so many people in the United States goof up the way they were doing?

That, Malone told himself, was a good question, a basic and an important question. He was proud of himself for thinking of it.

Unfortunately, he didn't have the answer.

But he thought he knew a way of getting one.

It was perfectly true that nobody knew much about how psionics worked. For that matter, nobody knew very much about how gravity worked. But there was still some information—and, in the case of psionics, Malone knew where it was to be found.

It was to be found in Yucca Flats, Nevada.

It was, of course, true that Nevada would probably be even hotter than Washington, D. C. But there was no help for that, Malone told himself sadly; and, besides, the cold chill of the expert himself would probably cool things off quite rapidly. Malone thought of Dr. Thomas O'Connor, the Westinghouse psionics expert and frowned. O'Connor was not exactly what might be called a friendly man.

But he did know more about psionics than anyone else Malone could think of. And his help had been invaluable in solving the two previous psionic cases Malone had worked on.

For a second he thought of calling O'Connor, but he brushed that thought aside bravely. In spite of the heat of Yucca Flats, he would have to talk to the man personally. He thought again of O'Connor's congealed personality, and wondered if it would really be effective in combating the heat. If it were, he told himself, he would take the man right back to Washington with him, and plug him into the air-conditioning lines.

He sighed deeply, thought about a cigar and decided regretfully against it, here on the public street where he would be visible to anyone. Instead, he looked around him, discovered that he was only a block from a large, neon-lit drugstore and headed for it. Less than a minute later he was in a phone booth.

The operators throughout the country seemed to suffer from heat prostration, and Malone was hardly inclined to blame them. But, all the same, it took several minutes for him to get through to Dr. O'Connor's office, and a minute or so more before he could convince a security-addled secretary that, after all, he would hardly blow O'Connor to bits over the long-distance phone.

Finally the secretary, with a sigh of reluctance, said she would see if Dr. O'Connor were available. Malone waited in the phone booth, opening the door every few seconds to breathe. The booth was air-conditioned, but remained for some mystical reason an even ten degrees above the boiling point of Malone's temper.

Finally Dr. O'Connor's lean, pallid face appeared on the screen. He had not changed since Malone had last seen him. He still looked, and acted, like one of Malone's more disliked law professors.

"Ah," the scientist said in a cold, precise voice. "Mr. Malone. I am sorry for our precautions, but you understand that security must be served."

"Sure," Malone said.

"Being an FBI man, of course you would," Dr. O'Connor went on, his face changing slightly and his voice warming almost to the boiling point of nitrogen. It was obvious that the phrase was Dr. O'Connor's idea of a little joke, and Malone smiled politely and nodded. The scientist seemed to feel some friendliness toward Malone, though it was hard to tell for sure. But Malone had brought him some fine specimens to work with—telepaths and teleports, though human, being no more than specimens to such a very precise scientific mind—and he seemed grateful for Malone's diligence and effort in finding such fascinating objects of study.

That Malone certainly hadn't started out to find them made, it appeared, very little difference.

"Well, then," O'Connor said, returning to his normal, serious tone, "what can

I do for you, Mr. Malone?"

"If you have the time, doctor," Malone said respectfully, "I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes." He had the absurd feeling that O'Connor was going to tell him to stop by after class, but the scientist only nodded.

"Your call is timed very well," he said. "As it happens, Mr. Malone, I do have a few seconds to spare just now."

"Fine," Malone said.

"I should be glad to talk with you," O'Connor said, without looking any more glad than ever.

"I'll be right there," Malone said. O'Connor nodded again, and blanked out. Malone switched off and took a deep, superheated breath of phone booth air. For a second he considered starting his trip from outside the phone booth, but that was dangerous—if not to Malone, then to innocent spectators. Psionics was by no means a household word, and the sight of Malone leaving for Nevada might send several citizens straight to the wagon. Which was not a place, he thought judiciously, for anybody to be on such a hot day.

He closed his eyes for a fraction of a second. In that time he reconstructed from memory a detailed, three-dimensional, full-color image of Dr. O'Connor's office in his mind. It was perfect in detail; he checked it over mentally and then, by a special effort of will, he gave himself the psychic push that made the transition possible.

When he opened his eyes, he was in O'Connor's office, standing in front of the scientist's wide desk. He hoped nobody had been looking into the phone booth at the instant he had disappeared; but he was reasonably sure he'd been unobserved. People didn't go around peering into phone booths, after all, and he had seen no one.

O'Connor looked up without surprise. "Ah," he said. "Sit down, Mr. Malone." Malone looked around for the chair, which was an uncomfortably straight-backed affair, and sat down in it gingerly. Remembering past visits to O'Connor, he was grateful for even the small amount of relaxation the hard wood afforded him. O'Connor had only recently unbent to the point of supplying a spare chair in his office for visitors, and, apparently, especially for Malone. Perhaps, Malone thought, it was more gratitude for the lovely specimens.

Malone still felt uncomfortable, but tried bravely not to show it. He felt slightly guilty, too, as he always did when he popped into O'Connor's office without bothering to stay spacebound. By law, after all, he knew he should check in and out at the main gate of the huge, ultra-top-secret government reservation whenever he visited Yucca Flats. But that meant wasting a lot of time and going through a lot of trouble. Malone had rationalized it out for himself that way, and had got just far enough to do things the quick and easy way, and not quite far enough to feel un-

disturbed about it. After all, he told himself grimly, anything that saved time and trouble increased the efficiency of the FBI, so it was all to the good.

He swallowed hard. "Dr. O'Connor—" he began.

O'Connor looked up again. "Yes?" he said. He'd had plenty of practice in watching people appear and disappear, between Malone and the specimens Malone had brought him; he was beyond surprise or shock by now.

"I came here to talk to you," Malone began again.

O'Connor nodded, a trifle impatiently. "Yes," he said. "I know that."

"Well—" Malone thought fast. Presenting the case to O'Connor was impossible; it was too complicated, and it might violate governmental secrecy somewhere along the line. He decided to wrap it up in a hypothetical situation. "Doctor," he said, "I know that all the various manifestations of the psi powers were investigated and named long before responsible scientists became interested in the subject."

"That," O'Connor said with some reluctance, "is true." He looked sad, as if he wished they'd waited on naming some of the psionic manifestations until he'd been born and started investigating them. Malone tried to imagine a person doing something called O'Connorizing, and decided he was grateful for history.

"Well, then—" he said.

"At least," O'Connor cut in, "it is true in a rather vague and general way. You see, Mr. Malone, any precise description of a psionic manifestation must wait until a metalanguage has grown up to encompass it; that is, until understanding and knowledge have reached the point where careful and accurate description can take place."

"Oh," Malone said helplessly. "Sure." He wondered if what O'Connor had said meant anything, and decided that it probably did, but he didn't want to know about it.

"While we have not yet reached that point," O'Connor said, "we are approaching it in our experiments. I am hopeful that, in the near future—"

"Well," Malone cut in desperately, "sure. Of course. Naturally."

Dr. O'Connor looked miffed. The temperature of the room seemed to drop several degrees, and Malone swallowed hard and tried to look ingratiating and helpful, like a student with nothing but A's on his record.

Before O'Connor could pick up the thread of his sentence, Malone went on: "What I mean is something like this. Picking up the mental activity of another person is called telepathy. Floating in the air is called levitation. Moving objects around is psychokinesis. Going from one place to another instantaneously is teleportation. And so on."

"The language you use," O'Connor said, still miffed, "is extremely loose. I

might go so far as to say that the statements you have made are, essentially, meaningless as a result of their lack of rigor.''

Malone took a deep breath. ''Dr. O'Connor,'' he said, ''you know what I mean, don't you?''

''I believe so,'' O'Connor said, with the air of a king granting a pardon to a particularly repulsive-looking subject in the lowest income brackets.

''Well, then,'' Malone said. ''Yes or no?''

O'Connor frowned. ''Yes or no what?'' he said.

''I'' Malone blinked. ''I meant, the things have names,'' he said at last. ''All the various psionic manifestations have names.''

''Ah,'' O'Connor said. ''Well. I should say.'' He put his fingertips together and stared at a point on the white ceiling for a second. ''Yes,'' he said at last.

Malone breathed a sigh of relief. ''Good,'' he said. ''That's what I wanted to know.'' He leaned forward. ''And if they all do have names,'' he went on, ''what is it called, when a large group of people are forced to act in a certain manner?''

O'Connor shrugged. ''Forced?'' he said.

''Forced by mental power,'' Malone said.

There was a second of silence.

''At first,'' O'Connor said, ''I might think of various examples: the actions of a mob, for example, or the demonstrations of the Indian Rope Trick, or perhaps the sale of a useless product through television or through other advertising.'' Again his face moved, ever so slightly, in what he obviously believed to be a smile. ''The usual name for such a phenomenon is 'mass hypnotism,' Mr. Malone,'' he said. ''But that is not, strictly speaking, a psi phenomenon at all. Studies in that area belong to the field of mob psychology; they are not properly in my scope.'' He looked vastly superior to anything and everything that was outside his scope. Malone concentrated on looking receptive and understanding.

''Yes?'' he said.

O'Connor gave him a look that made Malone feel he'd been caught cribbing during an exam, but the scientist said nothing to back up the look. Instead, he went on: ''I will grant that there may be an amplification of the telepathic faculty in the normal individual in such cases.''

''Good,'' Malone said doubtfully.

''Such an amplification,'' O'Connor went on, as if he hadn't heard, ''would account for the apparent ... ah ... mental linkage that makes a mob appear to act as a single organism during certain periods of ... ah ... stress.'' He looked judicious for a second, and then nodded. ''However,'' he said, ''other than that, I would doubt that there is any psionic force involved.''

Malone spent a second or two digesting O'Connor's reply. ''Well,'' he said at

last, "I'm not sure that's what I meant. I mean, I'm not sure I meant to ask that question." He took a breath and decided to start all over. "It's not like a mob," he said, "with everybody all doing the same thing at the same time. It's more like a group of men, all separated, without any apparent connections between any of the men. And they're all working toward a common goal. All doing different things, but all with the same objective. See?"

"Of course I do," O'Connor said flatly. "But what you're suggesting—" He looked straight at Malone. "Have you had any experience of this ... phenomenon?"

"Experience?" Malone said.

"I believe you have had," O'Connor said. "Such a concept could not have come to you in a theoretical manner. You must be involved with an actual situation very much like the one you describe."

Malone swallowed. "Me?" he said.

"Mr. Malone," O'Connor said. "May I remind you that this is Yucca Flats? That the security checks here are as careful as anywhere in the world? That I, myself, have top-security clearance for my special projects? You do not need to watch your words here."

"It's not security," Malone said. "Anyhow, it's not only security. But things are pretty complicated."

"I assure you," O'Connor said, "that I will be able to understand even events which you feel are complex."

Malone swallowed again, hard. "I didn't mean—" he started.

"Please, Mr. Malone," O'Connor said. His voice was colder than usual. Malone had the feeling that he was about to take the extra chair away. "Go on," O'Connor said. "Explain yourself."

Malone took a deep breath. He started with the facts he'd been told by Burris, and went straight through to the interviews of the two computer-secretary technicians by Boyd and Company.

It took quite a while. By the time he had finished, O'Connor wasn't looking frozen any more; he'd apparently forgotten to keep the freezer coils running. Instead, his face showed frank bewilderment, and great interest. "I never heard of such a thing," he said. "Never. Not at any time."

"But—"

O'Connor shook his head. "I have never heard of a psionic manifestation on that order," he said. It seemed to be a painful admission. "Something that would make a random group of men co-operate in that manner—why, it's completely new."

"It is?" Malone said, wondering if, when it was all investigated and described, it might be called O'Connorizing. Then he wondered how anybody was going to

go about investigating it and describing it, and sank even deeper into gloom.

"Completely new," O'Connor said. "You may take my word." Then, slowly, he began to brighten again, with all the glitter of newly-formed ice. "As a matter of fact," he said, in a tone more like his usual one, "Mr. Malone, I don't think it's possible."

"But it happened," Malone said. "It's still happening. All over."

O'Connor's lips tightened. "I have given my opinion," he said. "I do not believe that such a thing is possible. There must be some other explanation."

"All right," Malone said agreeably. "I'll bite. What is it?"

O'Connor frowned. "Your levity," he said, "is uncalled-for."

Malone shrugged. "I didn't mean to be—" he paused. "Anyhow, I didn't mean to be funny," he went on. "But I would like to have another idea of what's causing all this."

"Scientific theories," O'Connor said sternly, "are not invented on the spur of the moment. Only after long, careful thought—"

"You mean you can't think of anything," Malone said.

"There must be some other explanation," O'Connor said. "Naturally, since the facts have only now been presented to me, it is impossible for me to display at once a fully constructed theory."

Malone nodded slowly. "O.K.," he said. "Have you got any hints, then? Any ideas at all?"

O'Connor shook his head. "I have not," he said. "But I strongly suggest, Mr. Malone, that you recheck your data. The fault may very well lie in your own interpretations of the actual facts."

"I don't think so," Malone said.

O'Connor grimaced. "I do," he said firmly.

Malone sighed, very faintly. He shifted in the chair and began to realize, for the first time, just how uncomfortable it really was. He also felt a little chilly, and the chill was growing. That, he told himself, was the effect of Dr. O'Connor. He no longer regretted wearing his hat. As a matter of fact, he thought wistfully for a second of a small, light overcoat.

O'Connor, he told himself, was definitely not the warm, friendly type.

"Well, then," he said, conquering the chilly feeling for a second, "maybe there's somebody else. Somebody who knows something more about psionics, and who might have some other ideas about—"

"Please, Mr. Malone," O'Connor said. "The United States Government would hardly have chosen me had I not been uniquely qualified in my field."

Malone sighed again. "I mean ... maybe there are some books on the subject," he said quietly, hoping he sounded tactful. "Maybe there's something I could

look up.''

''Mr. Malone.'' The temperature of the office, Malone realized, was definitely lowering. O'Connor's built-in freezer coils were working overtime, he told himself. ''The field of psionics is so young that I can say, without qualification, that I am acquainted with everything written on the subject. By that, of course, I mean scientific works. I do not doubt that the American Society for Psychical Research, for instance, has hundreds of crackpot books which I have never read, or even heard of. But in the strictly scientific field, I must say that—''

He broke off, looking narrowly at Malone with what might have been concern, but looked more like discouragement and boredom.

''Mr. Malone,'' he said, ''are you ill?''

Malone thought about it. He wasn't quite sure, he discovered. The chill in the office was bothering him more and more, and as it grew he began to doubt that it was all due to the O'Connor influence. Suddenly a distinct shudder started somewhere in the vicinity of his shoulders and rippled its way down his body.

Another one followed it, and then a third.

''Me?'' Malone said. ''I'm ... I'm all right.''

''You seem to have contracted a chill,'' O'Connor said.

A fourth shudder followed the other three.

''I ... guess so,'' Malone said. ''I d-d ... I do s-seem to be r-r-rather chilly.''

O'Connor nodded. ''Ah,'' he said. ''I thought so. Although a chill is certainly odd at seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit.'' He looked at the thermometer just outside the window of his office, then turned back to Malone. ''Pardon me,'' he said. ''Seventy-one point six.''

''Is ... is that all it is?'' Malone said. Seventy-one point six degrees, or even seventy-two, hardly sounded like the broiling Nevada desert he'd expected.

''Of course,'' O'Connor said. ''At nine o'clock in the morning, one would hardly expect great temperatures. The desert becomes quite hot during the day, but cools off rapidly; I assume you are familiar with the laws covering the system.''

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''S-sure.''

The chills were not getting any better. They continued to travel up and down his body with the dignified regularity of Pennsylvania Railroad commuter trains.

O'Connor frowned for a second. It was obvious that his keen scientific eye was sizing up the phenomenon, and reporting events to his keen scientific brain. In a second or less, the keen scientific brain had come up with an answer, and Dr. O'Connor spoke in his very keenest scientific voice.

''I should have warned you,'' he said, without an audible trace of regret. ''The answer is childishly simple, Mr. Malone. You left Washington at noon.''

''Just a little before noon,'' Malone said. Remembering the burning sun, he

added: "High noon. Very high."

"Just so," O'Connor said. "And not only the heat was intense; the humidity, I assume, was also high."

"Very," Malone said, thinking back. He shivered again.

"In Washington," O'Connor said, "it was noon. Here it is nine o'clock, and hardly as warm. The atmosphere is quite arid, and about twenty degrees below that obtaining in Washington."

Malone thought about it, trying to ignore the chills. "Oh," he said at last. "And all the time I thought it was you."

"What?" O'Connor leaned forward.

"Nothing," Malone said hastily.

"My suggestion," O'Connor said, putting his fingertips together again, "is that you take off your clothes, which are undoubtedly damp, and—"

Naturally, Malone had not brought any clothes to Yucca Flats to change into. And when he tried to picture himself in a spare suit of Dr. O'Connor's, the picture just wouldn't come. Besides, the idea of doing a modified strip-tease in, or near, the O'Connor office was thoroughly unattractive.

"Well," he said slowly, "thanks a lot, doctor, but no thanks. I really have a better idea."

"Better?" O'Connor said.

"Well, I—" Malone took a deep breath and shut his eyes.

He heard Dr. O'Connor say: "Well, Mr. Malone—good-by. And good luck."

Then the office in Yucca Flats was gone, and Malone was standing in the bedroom of his own apartment, on the fringes of Washington, D. C.

**IV**

He walked over to the wall control and shut off the air-conditioning in a hurry. He threw open a window and breathed great gulps of the hot, humid air from the streets. In a small corner at the back of his mind, he wondered why he was grateful for the air he had suffered under only a few minutes before. But that, he reflected, was life. And a very silly kind of life, too, he told himself without rancor.

In a few minutes he left the window, somewhat restored, and headed for the shower. When it was running nicely and he was under it, he started to sing. But his voice didn't sound as much like the voice of Lauritz Melchior as it usually did, not even when he made a brave, if foolhardy stab at the Melchior accent. Slowly, he began to realize that he was bothered.

He climbed out of the shower and started drying himself. Up to now, he thought, he had depended on Dr. Thomas O'Connor for edifying, trustworthy and reasonably complete information about psionics and psi phenomena in general. He had

looked on O'Connor as a sort of living version of an extremely good edition of the Britannica, always available for reference.

And now O'Connor had failed him. That, Malone thought, was hardly fair. O'Connor had no business failing him—particularly when there was no place else to go.

The scientist had been right, of course, Malone knew. There was no other scientist who knew as much about psionics as O'Connor, and if O'Connor said there were no books, then that was that: there were no books.

He reached for a drawer in his dresser, opened it and pulled out some underclothes, humming tunelessly under his breath as he dressed. If there was no one to ask, he thought, and if there were no books—

He stopped with a sock in his hand, and stared at it in wonder. O'Connor hadn't said there were no books. As a matter of fact, Malone realized, he'd said exactly the opposite.

There were books. But they were "crackpot" books. O'Connor had never read them. He had, he said, probably never even heard of many of them.

"Crackpot" was a fighting word to O'Connor. But to Malone it had all the sweetness of flattery. After all, he'd found telepaths in insane asylums, and teleports among the juvenile delinquents of New York. "Crackpot" was a word that was rapidly ceasing to have any meaning at all in Malone's mind.

He realized that he was still staring at the sock, which was black with a gold clock. Hurriedly, he put it on, and finished dressing. He reached for the phone and made a few fast calls, and then teleported himself to his locked office in FBI Headquarters, on East Sixty-ninth Street in New York. He let himself out, and strolled down the corridor. The agent-in-charge looked up from his desk as Malone passed, blinked, and said: "Hello, Malone. What's up now?"

"I'm going prowling," Malone said. "But there won't be any work for you, as far as I can see."

"Oh?"

"Just relax," Malone said. "Breathe easy."

"I'll try to," the agent-in-charge said, a little sadly. "But every time you show up, I think about that wave of red Cadillacs you started. I'll never feel really secure again."

"Relax," Malone said. "Next time it won't be Cadillacs. But it might be spirits, blowing on ear-trumpets. Or whatever it is they do."

"Spirits, Malone?" the agent-in-charge said.

"No, thanks," Malone said sternly. "I never drink on duty." He gave the agent a cheery wave of his hand and went out to the street.

The Psychical Research Society had offices in the Ravell Building, a large struc-

ture composed mostly of plate glass and anodized aluminum that looked just a little like a bright blue, partially transparent crackerbox that had been stood on end for purposes unknown. Having walked all the way down to this box on Fifty-sixth Street, Malone had recovered his former sensitivity range to temperature and felt pathetically grateful for the coolish sea breeze that made New York somewhat less of an unbearable Summer Festival than was normal.

The lobby of the building was glittering and polished, as if human beings could not possibly exist in it. Malone took an elevator to the sixth floor, stepped out into a small, equally polished hall, and hurriedly looked off to his right. A small door stood there, with a legend engraved in elegantly small letters. It said:

The Psychical Research SocietyPush

Malone obeyed instructions. The door swung noiselessly open, and then closed behind him.

He was in a large square-looking room which had a couch and chair set at one corner, and a desk at the far end. Behind the desk was a brass plate, on which was engraved:

The Psychical Research SocietyMain Offices

To Malone's left was a hall that angled off into invisibility, and to the left of the desk was another one, going straight back past doors and two radiators until it ran into a right-angled turn and also disappeared.

Malone took in the details of his surroundings almost automatically, filing them in his memory just in case he ever needed to use them.

One detail, however, required more than automatic attention. Sitting behind the desk, her head just below the brass plaque, was a redhead. She was, Malone thought, positively beautiful. Of course, he could not see the lower two-thirds of her body, but if they were half as interesting as the upper third and the face and head, he was willing to spend days, weeks or even months on their investigation. Some jobs, he told himself, feeling a strong sense of duty, were definitely worth taking time over.

She was turned slightly away from Malone, and had obviously not heard him come in. Malone wondered how best to announce himself, and regretfully gave up the idea of tiptoeing up to the girl, placing his hands over her eyes, kissing the back of her neck and crying: "Surprise!" It was elegant, he felt, but it just wasn't right.

He compromised at last on the old established method of throat-clearing to attract her attention. He was sure he could take it from there, to an eminently satisfying conclusion.

He tiptoed on the deep-pile rug right up to her desk.

And the expected happened.

He sneezed.

The sneeze was loud and long, and it echoed through the room and throughout the corridors. It sounded to Malone like the blast of a small bomb, or possibly a grenade. Startled himself by the volume of sound he had managed to generate, he jumped back.

The girl had jumped, too—but her leap had been straight upward, about an inch and a half. She came down on her chair and reached up a hand. The hand wiped the back of her neck with a slow, lingering motion of complete loathing. Then, equally slowly, she turned.

"That," she said in a low, sweet voice, "was a dirty trick."

"It was an accident," Malone said.

She regarded Malone darkly. "Do you always do that to strangers? Is it some new sort of perversion?"

"I have never done such a thing before," Malone said sternly.

"Oh," the girl said. "An experimenter. Avid for new sensations. Probably a jaded scion of a rich New York family." She paused. "Tell me," she said. "Is it fun?"

Malone opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He shut it, thought for a second and then tried again. He got as far as: "I—" before Nemesis overtook him. The second sneeze was even louder and more powerful than the first had been.

"It must be fun," the girl said acidly, producing a handkerchief from somewhere and going to work on her face. "You just can't seem to wait to do it again. Would it do any good to tell you that the fascination with this form of greeting is not universal? Or don't you care?"

Malone said, goaded, "I've got a cold."

"And you feel you should share it with the world," the girl said. "I quite understand. Tell me, is there anything I can do for you? Or has your mission been accomplished?"

"My mission?" Malone said.

"Having sneezed twice at me," the girl said, "do you now feel satisfied? Will you vanish softly and silently away? Or do you want to sneeze at somebody else?"

"I want the President of the Society," Malone said. "According to my information, his name is Sir Lewis Carter."

"And if you sneeze at him," the girl said, "yours is going to be mud. He isn't much on novelty."

"I—"

"Besides which," she said, "he's extremely busy. And I don't think he'll see you at all. Why don't you go and sneeze at somebody else? There must be lots of people who would consider themselves honored to be noticed, especially in such

a startling way. Why don't you try and find one somewhere? Somewhere very far away?''

Malone was beyond speech. He fumbled for his wallet, flipped it open and showed the girl his identification.

''My, my,'' she said. ''And hasn't the FBI anything better to do? I mean, can't you go and sneeze at counterfeiters in their lairs, or wherever they might be?''

''I want to see Sir Lewis Carter,'' Malone said doggedly.

The girl shrugged and picked up the phone on her desk. It was a blank-vision device, of course; many office intercoms were. She dialed, waited and then said: ''Sir Lewis, please.'' Another second went by. Then she spoke again. ''Sir Lewis,'' she said, ''this is Lou, at the front desk. There's a man here named Malone, who wants to see you.''

She waited a second. ''I don't know what he wants,'' she told the phone. ''But he's from the FBI.'' A second's pause. ''That's right, the FBI,'' she said. ''All right, Sir Lewis. Right away.'' She hung up the phone and turned to watch Malone warily.

''Sir Lewis,'' she said, ''will see you. I couldn't say why. But take the side corridor to the rear of the suite. His office has his name on it, and I won't tell you you can't miss it because I have every faith that you will. Good luck.''

Malone blinked. ''Look,'' he said. ''I know I startled you, but I didn't mean to. I—'' He started to sneeze, but this time he got his own handkerchief out in time and muffled the explosion slightly.

''Good work,'' the girl said approvingly.

There was nothing at all to say to that remark, Malone reflected as he wended his way down the side corridor. It seemed endless, and kept branching off unexpectedly. Once he blundered into a large open room filled with people at desks. A woman who seemed to have a great many teeth and rather bulbous eyes looked up at him. ''Can I help you?'' she said in a fervent whine.

''I sincerely hope not,'' Malone said, backing away and managing to find the corridor once more. After what seemed like a long time, and two more sneezes, he found a small door which was labeled in capital letters:

THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCH SOCIETY

SIR LEWIS CARTER

PRESIDENT

Malone sighed. ''Well,'' he muttered, ''they certainly aren't hiding anything.'' He pushed at the door, and it swung open.

Sir Lewis was a tall, solidly-built man with a kindly expression. He wore gray flannel trousers and a brown tweed jacket, which made an interesting color contrast with his iron-gray hair. His teeth were clenched so firmly on the bit of a calabash pipe with a meerschaum bowl that Malone wondered if he could ever get

loose. Malone shut the door behind him, and Sir Lewis rose and extended a hand.

Malone went to the desk and reached across to take the hand. It was firm and dry. "I'm Kenneth Malone," Malone said.

"Ah, yes," Sir Lewis said. "Pleased to meet you; always happy, of course, to do whatever I can for your FBI. Not only a duty, so to speak, but a pleasure. Sit down. Please do sit down."

Malone found a chair at the side of the desk, and sank into it. It was soft and comfortable. It provided such a contrast to O'Connor's furnishings that Malone began to wish it was Sir Lewis who was employed at Yucca Flats. Then he could tell Sir Lewis everything about the case.

Now, of course, he could only hedge and try to make do without stating very many facts. "Sir Lewis," he said, "I trust you'll keep this conversation confidential."

"Naturally," Sir Lewis said. He removed the pipe, stared at it, and replaced it.

"I can't give you the full details," Malone went on, "but the FBI is presently engaged in an investigation which requires the specialized knowledge your organization seems to have."

"FBI?" Sir Lewis said. "Specialized investigation?" He seemed pleased, but a trifle puzzled. "Dear boy, anything we have is at your disposal, of course. But I quite fail to see how you can consider us—"

"It's rather an unusual problem," Malone said, feeling that that was the understatement of the year. "But I understand that your records go back nearly a century."

"Quite true," Sir Lewis murmured.

"During that time," Malone said, "the Society investigated a great many supposedly supernatural or supernormal incidents."

"Many of them," Sir Lewis said, "were discovered to be fraudulent, I'm afraid. The great majority, in fact."

"That's what I'd assume," Malone said. He fished in his pockets, found a cigarette and lit it. Sir Lewis went on chewing at his unlit pipe. "What we're interested in," Malone said, "is some description of the various methods by which these frauds were perpetrated."

"Ah," Sir Lewis said. "The tricks of the trade, so to speak?"

"Exactly," Malone said.

"Well, then," Sir Lewis said. "The luminous gauze, for instance, that passes for ectoplasm; the various methods of table-lifting; control of the ouija board—things like that?"

"Not quite that elementary," Malone said. He puffed on the cigarette, wishing it was a cigar. "We're pretty much up to that kind of thing. But had it ever occurred

to you that many of the methods used by phony mind-reading acts, for instance, might be used as communication methods by spies?''

''Why, I believe some have been,'' Sir Lewis said. ''Though I don't know much about that, of course; there was a case during the First World War—''

''Exactly,'' Malone said. He took a deep breath. ''It's things like that we're interested in,'' he said, and spent the next twenty minutes slowly approaching his subject. Sir Lewis, apparently fascinated, was perfectly willing to unbend in any direction, and jotted down notes on some of Malone's more interesting cases, murmuring: ''Most unusual, most unusual,'' as he wrote.

The various types of phenomena that the Society had investigated came into the discussion, and Malone heard quite a lot about the Beyond, the Great Summerland, Spirit Mediums and the hypothetical existence of fairies, goblins and elves.

''But, Sir Lewis—'' he said.

''I make no claims personally,'' Sir Lewis said. ''But I understand that there is a large and somewhat vocal group which does make rather solid-sounding claims in that direction. They say that they have seen fairies, talked with goblins, danced with the elves.''

''They must be very unusual people,'' Malone said, understating heavily.

''Oh,'' Sir Lewis said, ''without a that it goes through Accounting.''

Talk like this passed away nearly a half hour, until Malone finally felt that it was the right time to introduce some of his real questions. ''Tell me, Sir Lewis,'' he said, ''have you had many instances of a single man, or a small group of men, controlling the actions of a much larger group? And doing it in such a way that the larger group doesn't even know it is being manipulated?''

''Of course I have,'' Sir Lewis said. ''And so have you. They call it advertising.''

Malone flicked his cigarette into an ashtray. ''I didn't mean exactly that,'' he said. ''Suppose they're doing it in such a way that the larger group doesn't even suspect that manipulation is going on?''

Sir Lewis removed his pipe and frowned at it. ''I may be able to give you a little information,'' he said slowly, ''but not much.''

''Ah?'' Malone said, trying to sound only mildly interested.

''Outside of mob psychology,'' Sir Lewis said, ''and all that sort of thing, I really haven't seen any record of a case of such a thing happening. And I can't quite imagine anyone faking it.''

''But you have got some information?'' Malone said.

''Certainly,'' Sir Lewis said. ''There is always spirit control.''

''Spirit control?'' Malone blinked.

''Demonic intervention,'' Sir Lewis said. '''My name is Legion,' you know.''

Sir Lewis Legion, Malone thought confusedly, was a rather unusual name. He took a breath and caught hold of his revolving mind. "How would you go about that?" he said, a little hopelessly.

"I haven't the foggiest," Sir Lewis admitted cheerfully. "But I will have it looked up for you." He made a note. "Anything else?"

Malone tried to think. "Yes," he said at last. "Can you give me a condensed report on what is known—and I mean known—on telepathy and teleportation?"

"What you want," Sir Lewis said, "are those cases proven genuine, not the ones in which we have established fraud, or those still in doubt."

"Exactly," Malone said. If he got no other use out of the data, it would provide a measuring-stick for the Society. The general public didn't know that the government was actually using psionic powers, and the Society's theories, checked against actual fact, would provide a rough index of reliability to use on the Society's other data.

But spirits, somehow, didn't seem very likely. Malone sighed and stood up.

"I'll have copies made of all the relevant material," Sir Lewis said, "from our library and research files. Where do you want the material sent? I do want to warn you of its bulk; there may be quite a lot of it."

"FBI Headquarters, on Sixty-ninth Street," Malone said. "And send a statement of expenses along with it. As long as the bill's within reason, don't worry about itemizing; I'll see that it goes through Accounting."

Sir Lewis nodded. "Fine," he said. "And, if you should have any difficulties with the material, please let me know. I'll always be glad to help."

"Thanks for your co-operation," Malone said. He went to the door, and walked on out.

He blundered back into the same big room again, on his way through the corridors. The bulbous-eyed woman, who seemed to have inherited a full set of thirty-two teeth from each of her parents, gave him a friendly if somewhat crowded smile, but Malone pressed on without a word. After a while, he found the reception room again.

The girl behind the desk looked up. "How did he react?" she said.

Malone blinked. "React?" he said.

"When you sneezed at him," she said. "Because I've been thinking it over, and I've got a new theory. You're doing a survey on how people act when encountering sneezes. Like Kinsey."

This girl—Lou something, Malone thought, and with difficulty refrained from adding "Gehrig"—had an unusual effect, he decided. He wondered if there were anyone in the world she couldn't reduce to paralyzed silence.

"Of course," she went on, "Kinsey was dealing with sex, and you aren't. At

least, you aren't during business hours." She smiled politely at Malone.

"No," he said helplessly, "I'm not."

"It is sneezing, then," she said. "Will I be in the book when it's published?"

"Book?" Malone said, feeling more and more like a rather low-grade moron.

"The book on sneezing, when you get it published," she said. "I can see it now—the Case of Miss X, a Receptionist."

"There isn't going to be any book," Malone said.

She shook her head. "That's a shame," she said. "I've always wanted to be a Miss X. It sounds exciting."

"X," Malone said at random, "marks the spot."

"Why, that's the sweetest thing that's been said to me all day," the girl said. "I thought you could hardly talk, and here you come out with lovely things like that. But I'll bet you say it to all the girls."

"I have never said it to anybody before," Malone said flatly. "And I never will again."

The girl sighed. "I'll treasure it," she said. "My one great moment. Good-by, Mr. ... Malone, isn't it?"

"Ken," Malone said. "Just call me Ken."

"And I'm Lou," the girl said. "Good-by."

An elevator arrived and Malone ducked into it. Louie? he thought. Louise? Luke? Of course, there was Sir Lewis Carter, who might be called Lou. Was he related to the girl?

No, Malone thought wildly. Relations went by last names. There was no reason for Lou to be related to Sir Lewis. They didn't even look alike. For instance, he had no desire whatever to make a date with Sir Lewis Carter, or to take him to a glittering nightclub. And the very idea of Sir Lewis Carter sitting on the Malone lap was enough to give him indigestion and spots before the eyes.

Sternly, he told himself to get back to business. The elevator stopped at the lobby and he got out and started down the street, feeling that consideration of the Lady Known As Lou was much more pleasant. After all, what did he have to work with, as far as his job was concerned?

So far, two experts had told him that his theory was full of lovely little holes. Worse than that, they had told him that mass control of human beings was impossible, as far as they knew.

And maybe it was impossible, he told himself sadly. Maybe he should just junk his whole theory and think up a new one. Maybe there was no psionics involved in the thing at all, and Boyd and O'Connor were right.

Of course, he had a deep-seated conviction that psionics was somewhere at the root of everything, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. A lot of people

had deep-seated convictions that they were beetles, or that the world was flat. And then again, murderers often suffered as a result of deep-seated convictions.

On the other hand, maybe he had invented a whole new psionic theory—or, at least, observed some new psionic facts. Maybe they would call the results Maloneizing, instead of O'Connorizing. He tried to picture a man opening a door and saying: "Come out quick—Mr. Frembits is Maloneizing again."

It didn't sound very plausible. But, after all, he did have a deep-seated conviction. He tried to think of a shallow-seated conviction, and failed. Didn't convictions ever stand up, anyhow, or lie down?

He shook his head, discovered that he was on Sixty-ninth Street, and headed for the FBI headquarters. His convictions, he had found, were sometimes an expression of his precognitive powers; he determined to ride with them, at least for a while.

By the time he came to the office of the agent-in-charge, he had figured out the beginnings of a new line of attack.

"How about the ghosts?" the agent-in-charge asked as he passed.

"They'll be along," Malone said. "In a big bundle, addressed to me personally. And don't open the bundle."

"Why not?" the agent-in-charge asked.

"Because I don't want the things to get loose and run around saying Boo! to everybody," Malone said brightly, and went on.

He opened the door of his private office, went inside and sat down at the desk there. He took his time about framing a thought, a single, clear, deliberate thought:

Your Majesty, I'd like to speak to you.

He hardly had time to finish it. A flash of color appeared in the room, just a few feet from his desk. The flash resolved itself into a tiny, grandmotherly-looking woman with a corona of white hair and a kindly, twinkling expression. She was dressed in the full court costume of the First Elizabethan period, and this was hardly surprising to Malone. The little old lady believed, quite firmly, that she was Queen Elizabeth I, miraculously preserved over all these centuries. Malone, himself, had practically forgotten that the woman's real name was Rose Thompson, and that she had only been alive for sixty-five years or so. For most of that time, she had been insane.

For all of that time, however, she had been a genuine telepath. She had been discovered during the course of Malone's first psionic case, and by now she had even learned to teleport by "reading" the process in Malone's mind.

"Good afternoon, Sir Kenneth," she said in a regal, kindly voice. She was mad, he knew, but her delusion was nicely kept within bounds. All of her bright world hinged on the single fact that she was unshakably certain of her royalty. As long as

the FBI catered to that notion—which included a Royal dwelling for her in Yucca Flats, and the privilege of occasionally knighting FBI Agents who had pleased her unpredictable fancy—she was perfectly rational on all other points. She co-operated with Dr. O'Connor and with the FBI in the investigation of her psionic powers, and she had given her Royal word not to teleport except at Malone's personal request.

"I'd like to talk to you," Malone said, "Your Majesty."

There was an odd note in the Queen's voice, and an odd, haunted expression on her face. "I've been hoping you'd ask me to come," she said.

"I had a hunch you were following me telepathically," Malone said. "Can you give me any help?"

"I ... I really don't know," she said. "It's something new, and something ... disturbing. I've never come across anything like it before."

"Like what?" Malone asked.

"It's the—" She made a gesture that conveyed nothing at all to Malone. "The ... the static," she said at last.

Malone blinked. "Static?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "You're not telepathic, so I can't tell you what it's really like. But ... well, Sir Kenneth, have you ever seen disturbance on a TV screen, when there's some powerful electric output nearby? The bright, senseless snowstorms, the meaningless hash?"

"Sure," Malone said.

"It's like that," she said. "It's a ... a sudden, meaningless, disturbing blare of telepathic energy."

The telephone rang once. Malone ignored it.

"What's causing these disturbances?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know, Sir Kenneth. I don't know," she said. "I can't pick up a person's mind over a distance unless I know him—and I can't see what's causing this at all. It's ... frankly, Sir Kenneth, it's rather terrifying."

The phone rang again.

"How long have you been experiencing this disturbance?" Malone asked. He looked at the phone.

"The telephone isn't important," Her Majesty said. "It's only Sir Thomas, calling to tell you he's arrested three spies, and that doesn't matter at all."

"It doesn't?"

"Not at all," Her Majesty said. "What does matter is that I've only been picking up these flashes since you were assigned to this new case, Sir Kenneth. And—" She paused.

"Well?" Malone said.

"And they only appear," Her Majesty said, "when I'm tuned to your mind!"

**V**

Malone stared. He tried to say something but he couldn't find any words. The telephone rang again and he pushed the switch with a sense of relief. The beard-fringed face of Thomas Boyd appeared on the screen.

"You're getting hard to find," Boyd said. "I think you're letting fame and fortune go to your head."

"I left word at the office that I was coming here," Malone said aggrievedly.

"Sure you did," Boyd said. "How do you think I found you? Am I telepathic? Do I have strange powers?"

"Wouldn't surprise me in the least," Malone said. "Now, about those spies—"

"See what I mean?" Boyd said. "How did you know?"

"Just lucky, I guess," Malone murmured. "But what about them?"

"Well," Boyd said, "we picked up two men working in the Senate Office Building, and another one working for the State Department."

"And they are spies?" Malone said. "Real spies?"

"Oh, they're real enough," Boyd said. "We've known about 'em for years, and I finally decided to pick them up for questioning. Maybe they have something to do with all this mess that's bothering everybody."

"You haven't the faintest idea what you mean," Malone said. "Mess is hardly the word."

Boyd snorted. "You go on getting yourself confused," he said, "while some of us do the real work. After all—"

"Never mind the insults," Malone said. "How about the spies?"

"Well," Boyd said, a trifle reluctantly, "they've been working as janitors and maintenance men, and of course we've made sure they haven't been able to get their hands on any really valuable information."

"So they've suddenly turned into criminal masterminds," Malone said. "After being under careful surveillance for years—"

"Well, it's possible," Boyd said defensively.

"Almost anything is possible," Malone said.

"Some things," Boyd said carefully, "are more possible than others."

"Thank you, Charles W. Aristotle," Malone said. "I hope you realize what you've done, picking up those three men. We might have been able to get some good lines on them, if you'd left them where they were."

There is an old story about a general who went on an inspection tour of the

front during World War I, and, putting his head incautiously up out of a trench, was narrowly missed by a sniper's bullet. He turned to a nearby sergeant and bellowed: "Get that sniper!"

"Oh, we've got him spotted, sir," the sergeant said. "He's been there for six days now."

"Well, then," the general said, "why don't you blast him out of there?"

"Well, sir, it's this way," the sergeant explained. "He's fired about sixty rounds since he's been out there, and he hasn't hit anything yet. We're afraid if we get rid of him they'll put up somebody who can shoot."

This was standard FBI policy when dealing with minor spies. A great many had been spotted, including four in the Department of Fisheries. But known spies are easier to keep track of than unknown ones. And, as long as they're allowed to think they haven't been spotted, they may lead the way to other spies or spy networks.

"I thought it was worth the risk," Boyd said. "After all, if they have something to do with the case—"

"But they don't," Malone said.

Boyd exploded, "Let me find out for myself, will you? You're spoiling all the fun."

"Well, anyhow," Malone said, "they don't."

"You can't afford to take any chances," Boyd said. "After all, when I think about William Logan, I tell myself we'd better take care of every lead."

"Well," Malone said finally, "you may be right. And then again, you may be normally wrong."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Boyd said.

"How should I know?" Malone said "I'm too busy to go around and around like this. But since you've picked up the spies, I suppose it won't do any harm to find out if they know anything."

Boyd snorted again. "Thank you," he said, "for your kind permission."

"I'll be right down," Malone said.

"I'll be waiting," Boyd said. "In Interrogation Room 7. You'll recognize me by the bullet hole in my forehead and the strange South American poison, hitherto unknown to science, in my oesophagus."

"Very funny," Malone said. "Don't give up the ship."

Boyd switched off without a word. Malone shrugged at the blank screen and pushed his own switch. Then he turned slowly back to Her Majesty, who was standing, waiting patiently, at the opposite side of the desk. Interference, he thought, located around him—

"Why, yes," she said. "That's exactly what I did say."

Malone blinked. "Your Majesty," he said, "would you mind terribly if I asked you questions before you answered them? I know you can see them in my mind, but it's simpler for me to do things the normal way, just now."

"I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "I do agree that matters are confused enough already. Please go on."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Malone said. "Well, then. Do you mean that I'm the one causing all this ... mental static?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Not at all. It's definitely coming from somewhere else, and it's beamed at you, or beamed around you."

"But—"

"It's just that I can only pick it up when I'm tuned to your mind," she said.

"Like now?" Malone said.

She shook her head. "Right now," she said, "there isn't any. It only happens every once in a while—every so often, and not continuously."

"Does it happen at regular intervals?" Malone said.

"Not as far as I've been able to tell," Her Majesty said. "It just ... happens, that's all. There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it. Except that it did start when you were assigned to this case."

"Lovely," Malone said. "And what is it supposed to mean?"

"Interference," she said. "Static. Jumble. That's all it means. I just don't know any more than that, Sir Kenneth; I've never experienced anything like it in my life. It really does disturb me."

That, Malone told himself, he could believe. It must be an experience, he told himself, like having someone you were looking at suddenly dissolve into a jumble of meaningless shapes and lights.

"That's a very good analogy," Her Majesty said. "If you'll pardon me speaking before you've voiced your thought—"

"Not at all," Malone said. "Go right ahead."

"Well, then," Her Majesty said. "The analogy you use is a good one. It's just as disturbing and as meaningless as that."

"And you don't know what's causing it?" Malone said.

"I don't know," she said.

"Nor what the purpose of it is?" he said.

Her Majesty shook her head slowly. "Sir Kenneth," she said, "I don't even know whether or not there is any purpose."

Malone sighed deeply. Nothing in the case seemed to make any sense. It wasn't that there were no clues, or no information for him to work with. There were a lot of clues, and there was a lot of information. But nothing seemed to link up with

anything else. Every new fact was a bright, shiny arrow pointing nowhere in particular.

"Well, then—" he started.

The intercom buzzed. Malone jabbed ferociously at the button. "Yes," he said.

"The ghosts are here," the agent-in-charge's voice said.

Malone blinked. "What?" he said.

"You said you were going to get some ghosts," the agent-in-charge said. "From the Psychical Research Society, in a couple of large bundles And they're here now. Want me to exorcise 'em for you?"

"No," Malone said wearily. "Just send them in to join the crowd. Got a messenger?"

"I'll send them down," the agent-in-charge said. "About one minute."

Malone nodded, realized the man couldn't see him, said: "Fine," and switched off. He looked at his watch. A little over half an hour had passed since he had left the Psychical Research Society offices. That, he told himself, was efficiency.

Not that the books would mean anything, he thought. They would just take their places at the end of the long row of meaningless, disturbing, vicious facts that cluttered up his mind. He wasn't an FBI agent any more; he was a clown and a failure, and he was through. He was going to resign and go to South Dakota and live the life of a hermit. He would drink goat's milk and eat old shoes or something, and whenever another human being came near he would run away and hide. They would call him Old Kenneth, and people would write articles for magazines about The Twentieth Century Hermit.

And that would make him famous, he thought wearily, and the whole circle would start all over again.

"Now, now, Sir Kenneth," Queen Elizabeth said. "Things aren't quite that bad."

"Oh, yes, they are," Malone said. "They're even worse."

"I'm sure we can find an answer to all your questions," Her Majesty said.

"Sure," Malone said. "Even I can find an answer. But it isn't the right one."

"You can?" Her Majesty said.

"That's right," Malone said. "My answer is: To Hell with everything."

Malone's Washington offices didn't look any different. He sighed and put the two big packages from the Psychical Research Society down on his desk, and then turned to Her Majesty.

"I wanted you to teleport along with me," he said, "because I need your help."

"Yes," she said. "I know."

He blinked. "Oh. Sure you do. But let me go over the details."

Her Majesty waved a gracious hand. "If you like, Sir Kenneth," she said.

Malone nodded. "We're going on down to Interrogation Room 7 now," he said. "Next door to it, there's an observation room, with a one-way panel in the wall. You'll be able to see us, but we won't be able to see you."

"I really don't require an observation panel," Her Majesty said. "If I enter your mind, I can see through your eyes—"

"Oh, sure," Malone said. "But the observation room was built for more normal people—saving your presence, Your Majesty."

"Of course," she said.

"Now," Malone went on, "I want you to watch all three of the men we're going to bring in, and dig everything you can out of their minds."

"Everything?" she said.

"We don't know what might be useful," Malone said. "Anything you can find. And if you want any questions asked—if there's anything you think I ought to ask the men, or say to them—there's a nonvision phone in the observation room. Just lift the receiver. That automatically rings the one in the Interrogation Room and I'll pick it up. Understand?"

"Perfectly, Sir Kenneth," she said.

"O.K., then," Malone said. "Let's go." They headed for the door. Malone stopped as he opened it. "And by the way," he said.

"Yes?"

"If you get any more of those—disturbances, let me know."

"At once," Her Majesty promised.

They went on down the hall and took the elevator down to Interrogation Room 7, on the lowest level. There was no particular reason for putting the Interrogation section down there, except that it tended to make prisoners more nervous. And a nervous prisoner, Malone knew, was very possibly a confessing prisoner.

Malone ushered Her Majesty through the unmarked door of the observation chamber, made sure that the panel and phone were in working order, and went out. He stepped into Interrogation Room 7 trying hard to look bored, businesslike and unbeatable. Boyd and four other agents were already there, all standing around and talking desultorily in low tones. None of them looked as if they had ever had a moment's worry in their lives. It was all part of the same technique, of course, Malone thought. Make the prisoner feel resistance is useless, and you've practically got him working for you.

The prisoner was a hulking, flabby fat man in work coveralls. He had black hair that spilled all over his forehead, and tiny button eyes. He was the only man in the room who was sitting down, and that was meant to make him feel even more inferior and insecure. His hands were clasped fatly in his lap, and he was staring down at them in a regretful manner. None of the FBI agents paid the slightest at-

tention to him. The general impression was that something really tough was coming up, but that they were in no hurry for it. They were willing to wait for the Third Degree, it seemed, until the blacksmith had done a really good job with the new spikes for the Iron Maiden.

The prisoner looked up apprehensively as Malone shut the door. Malone paid no attention to him, and the prisoner unclasped his hands, rubbed them on his coveralls and then reclasped them in his lap. His eyes fell again.

Boyd looked up, too. "Hello, Ken," he said. He tapped a sheaf of papers on the single table in the room. Malone went over and picked them up.

They were the abbreviated condensations of three dossiers. All three of the men covered in the dossiers were naturalized citizens, but all had come in us "political refugees"—from Hungary, from Czechoslovakia, and from East Germany. Further checking had turned up the fact that all three were actually Russians. They had been using false names during their stay in the United States, but their real ones were appended to the dossiers.

The fat one in the Interrogation Room was named Alexis Brubitsch. The other two, who were presumably waiting separately in other rooms, were Ivan Borbitsch and Vasili Garbitsch. The collection sounded, to Malone, like a seedy musical-comedy firm of lawyers: Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch. He could picture them dancing gaily across a stage while the strains of music followed them, waving legal forms and telephones and singing away.

Brubitsch did not, however, look very gay. Malone went over to him now, walking slowly, and looked down. Boyd came and stood next to him.

"This is the one who won't talk, eh?" Malone said, wondering if he sounded as much like Dick Tracy as he thought he did. It was a standard opening, meant to make the prisoner think his fellows had already confessed.

"That's him," Boyd said.

"Hm-m-m," Malone said, trying to look as if he were deciding between the rack and the boiling oil. Brubitsch fidgeted slightly, but he didn't say anything.

"We didn't know whether we had to get this one to talk, too," Boyd said. "What with the others, and all. But we did think you ought to have a look at him." He sounded very bored. It was obvious from his tone that the FBI didn't care in the least if Alexis Brubitsch never opened his mouth again, in what was likely to be a very short lifetime.

"Well," Malone said, equally bored, "we might be able to get a few corroborative details."

Brubitsch swallowed hard. Malone ignored him.

"Now, just look at him," Boyd said. "He certainly doesn't look like the head of a spy ring, does he?"

"Of course he doesn't," Malone said. "That's probably why the Russians used him. They figured nobody would ever look twice at a fat slob like this. Nobody would ever suspect him of being the head man."

"I guess you're right," Boyd said. He yawned, which Malone thought was overacting a trifle. Brubitsch saw the yawn, and one hand came up to jerk at his collar.

"Who'd ever think," Malone said, "that he plotted those killings in Redstone—all three of them?"

"It is surprising," Boyd said.

"But, then," Malone said, "we know he did. There isn't any doubt of that."

Brubitsch seemed to be turning a pale green. It was a fascinating color, unlike any other Malone had ever seen. He watched it with interest.

"Oh, sure," Boyd said. "We've got enough evidence from the other two to send this one to the chair tomorrow, if we want to."

"More than enough," Malone agreed.

Brubitsch opened his mouth, shut it again and closed his eyes. His lips moved silently.

"Tell me," Boyd said conversationally, leaning down to the fat man, "Did your orders on that job come from Moscow, or did you mastermind it all by yourself?"

Brubitsch's eyes stirred, then snapped open as if they'd been pulled by a string. "Me?" he said in a hoarse bass voice. "I know nothing about this murder. What murder?"

There were no such murders, of course. But Malone was not ready to let Brubitsch know anything about that. "Oh, the ones you shot in Redstone," he said in an offhand way.

"The what?" Brubitsch said. "I shot people? Never."

"Oh, sure you did," Boyd said. "The others say you did."

Brubitsch's head seemed to sink into his neck. "Borbitsch and Garbitsch, they tell you about a murder? It is not true. Is a lie."

"Really?" Malone said. "We think it's true."

"Is a lie," Brubitsch said, his little eyes peering anxiously from side to side. "Is not true," he went on hopefully. "I have alibi."

"You do?" Boyd said. "For what time?"

"For time when murder happened," Brubitsch said. "I was some place else."

"Well, then," Malone said, "how do you know when the murders were done? They were kept out of the newspapers." That, he reflected, was quite true, since the murders had never happened. But he watched Brubitsch with a wary eye.

"I know nothing about time," Brubitsch said, jerking at his collar. "I don't know when they happened."

"Then how can you have an alibi?" Boyd snapped.

"Because I didn't do them!" Brubitsch said tearfully. "If I didn't, then I must have alibi!"

"You'd be surprised," Malone said. "Now, about these murders—"

"Was no murder, not by me," Brubitsch said firmly. "Was never any killing of anybody, not even by accident."

"But your two friends say—" Boyd began.

"My two friends are not my friends," Brubitsch said firmly. "If they tell you about murder and say it was me, they are no friends. I did not murder anybody. I have alibi. I did not even murder anybody a little bit. They are no friends. This is terrible."

"There," Malone said reflectively, "I agree with you. It's positively awful. And I think we might as well give it up. After all, we don't need your testimony. The other two are enough; they'll get maybe ten years apiece, but you're going to get the chair."

"I will not sit down," Brubitsch said firmly. "I am innocent. I am innocent like a small child. Does a small child commit a murder? It is ridiculous."

Boyd picked up his cue with ease. "You might as well give us your side of the story, then," he said easily. "If you didn't commit any murders—"

"I am a small child," Brubitsch announced.

"O.K.," Boyd said. "But if you didn't commit any murders, just what have you been doing since you've been in this country as a Soviet agent?"

"I will say nothing," Brubitsch announced. "I am a small child. It is enough." He paused, blinked, and went on: "I will only tell you this: no murders were done by our group in any of our activities."

"And what were your activities?"

"Oh, many things," Brubitsch said. "Many, many things. We—"

The telephone rang loudly, and Malone scooped it up with a practiced hand. "Malone here," he said.

Her Majesty's voice was excited. "Sir Kenneth!" she said. "I just got a tremendous burst of—static!"

Malone blinked. Is my mind acting up again? he thought, knowing she would pick it up. Am I being interfered with?

He didn't feel any different. But then, how was he supposed to feel?

"It's not your mind, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said. "Not this time. It's his mind. That sneaky-thinking Brubitsch fellow."

Brubitsch? Malone thought. Now what is that supposed to mean?

"I don't know, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said. "But get on back to your ques-

tioning. He's ready to talk now."

"O.K.," Malone said aloud. "Fine." He hung up and looked back to the Russian sitting on his chair. Brubitsch was ready to talk, and that was one good thing, anyhow. But what was all the static about?

What was going on?

"Now, then," Malone said. "You were telling us about your group activities."

"True," Brubitsch said. "I did not commit any murders. It is possible that Borbitsch committed murders. It is possible that Garbitsch committed murders. But I do not think so."

"Why not?" Boyd said.

"They are my friends," Brubitsch said. "Even if they tell lies. They are also small children. Besides, I am not even the head of the group."

"Who is?" Malone said.

"Garbitsch," Brubitsch said instantly. "He worked in the State Department, and he told us what to look for in the Senate Office Building."

"What were you supposed to look for?" Boyd said.

"For information," Brubitsch said. "For scraps of paper, or things we overheard. But it was very bad, very bad."

"What do you mean, bad?" Malone said.

"Everything was terrible," Brubitsch said mournfully. "Sometimes Borbitsch heard something and forgot to tell Garbitsch about it. Garbitsch did not like this. He is a very inflamed person. Once he threatened to send Borbitsch to the island of Yap as a spy. That is a very bad place to go to. There are no enjoyments on the island of Yap, and no one likes strangers there."

"What did you do with your information?" Boyd said.

"We remembered it," Brubitsch said. "Or, if we had a scrap of paper, we saved it for Garbitsch and gave it to him. But I remember once that I had some paper. It had a formula on it. I do not know what the formula said."

"What was it about?" Malone said.

Brubitsch gave a massive shrug. "It was about an X and some numbers," he said. "It was not very interesting, but it was a formula, and Garbitsch would have liked it. Unfortunately, I did not give it to him."

"Why not?" Boyd said.

"I am ashamed," Brubitsch said, looking ashamed. "I was lighting a cigarette in the afternoon, when I had the formula. It is a very relaxing thing to smoke a cigarette in the afternoon. It is soothing to the soul." He looked very sad. "I was holding the piece of paper in one hand," he said. "Unfortunately, the match and the paper came into contact. I burned my finger. Here." He stuck out a finger toward Malone and Boyd, who looked at it without much interest for a second.

"The paper is gone," he said. "Don't tell Garbitsch. He is very inflamed."

Malone sighed. "But you remember the formula," he said. "Don't you?"

Brubitsch shook his massive head very slowly. "It was not very interesting," he said. "And I do not have a mathematical mind."

"We know," Malone said, "You are a small child."

"It was terrible," Brubitsch said. "Garbitsch was not happy about our activities."

"What did Garbitsch do with the information?" Boyd said.

"He passed it on," Brubitsch said. "Every week he would send a short-wave message to the homeland, in code. Some weeks he did not send the message."

"Why not?" Malone said.

"The radio did not work," Brubitsch said simply. "We received orders by short-wave, but sometimes we did not receive the orders. The radio was of very poor quality, and some weeks it refused to send any messages. On other weeks, it refused to receive any messages."

"Who was your contact in Russia?" Boyd said.

"A man named X," Brubitsch said. "Like in the formula."

"But what was his real name?" Malone said.

"Who knows?" Brubitsch said.

"What else did you do?" Boyd said.

"We met twice a week," Brubitsch said. "Sometimes in Garbitsch's home, sometimes in other places. Sometimes we had information. At other times, we were friends, having a social gathering."

"Friends?" Malone said.

Brubitsch nodded. "We drank together, talked, played chess. Garbitsch is the best chess player in the group. I am not very good. But once we had some trouble." He paused. "We had been drinking Russian liquors. They are very strong. We decided to uphold the honor of our country."

"I think," Malone murmured sadly, "I know what's coming."

"Ah?" Brubitsch said, interested. "At any rate, we decided to honor our country in song. And a policeman came and talked to us. He took us down to the police station."

"Why?" Boyd said.

"He was suspicious," Brubitsch said. "We were singing the Internationale, and he was suspicious. It is unreasonable."

"Oh, I don't know," Boyd said. "What happened then?"

"He took us to the police station," Brubitsch said, "and then after a little while he let us go. I do not understand this."

"It's all right," Malone said. "I do." He drew Boyd aside for a second, and whispered to him: "The cops were ready to charge these three clowns with everything in the book. We had a time springing them so we could go on watching them. I remember the stir-up, though I never did know their names until now."

Boyd nodded, and they returned to Brubitsch, who was staring up at them with surly eyes.

"It is a secret you are telling him," Brubitsch said. "That is not right."

"What do you mean, it's not right?" Malone said.

"It is wrong," Brubitsch went on. "It is not the American way."

He went on, with some prodding, to tell about the activities of the spy ring. It did not seem to be a very efficient spy ring; Brubitsch's long sad tale of forgotten messages, mixed orders, misplaced documents and strange mishaps was a marvel and a revelation to the listening officers.

"I've never heard anything like it," one of them whispered in a tone of absolute wonder. "They're almost working on our side."

Over an hour later, Malone turned wearily away from the prisoner. "All right, Brubitsch," he said. "I guess that pretty much covers things for the moment. If we want any more information, though—"

"Call on me," Brubitsch said sadly. "I am not going any place. And I will give you all the information you desire. But I did not commit any murders—"

"Good-bye, small child," Malone said, as two agents led the fat man away. The other two left soon afterward, and Malone and Boyd were alone.

"Think he was telling the truth?" Boyd said.

Malone nodded. "Nobody," he said, "could make up a story like that."

"I suppose so," Boyd said, and the phone rang. Malone picked it up.

"Well?" he asked.

"He was telling the truth, all right," Her Majesty said. "There are a few more details, of course—there was a girl Brubitsch was involved with, Sir Kenneth. But she doesn't seem to have anything to do with the spy ring, and besides, she isn't a very nice person. She always wants money."

"Sounds perfectly lovely," Malone said. "As a matter of fact, I think I know her. I know a lot of girls who always want money."

"You don't know this one, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said, "and besides, she wouldn't be a good influence on you."

Malone sighed. "How about the static explosions?" he said. "Pick up any more?"

"No," she said. "Just that one."

Malone nodded at the receiver. "All right," he said. "We're going to bring in

the second one now. Keep up the good work.''

He hung up.

''Who've you got in the Observation Room?'' Boyd asked.

''Queen Elizabeth I,'' Malone said. ''Her Royal Majesty.''

''Oh,'' Boyd said without surprise. ''Well, was Brubitsch telling the truth?''

''He wasn't holding back anything important,'' Malone said, thinking about the girl. It would be nice to meet a bad influence, he thought mournfully. It would be nice to go somewhere with a bad influence—a bad influence, he amended, with a good figure—and forget all about his job, about the spies, about telepathy, teleportation, psionics and everything else. It might be restful.

Unfortunately, it was impossible.

''What's this business about a static explosion?'' Boyd said.

''Don't ask silly questions,'' Malone said. ''A static explosion is a contradiction in terms. If something is static, it doesn't move—and whoever heard of a motionless explosion?''

''If it is a contradiction in terms,'' Boyd said, ''they're your terms.''

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''But I don't know what they mean. I don't even know what I mean.''

''You're in a bad way,'' Boyd said, looking sympathetic.

''I'm in a perfectly terrible way,'' Malone said, ''and it's going to get worse. You wait and see.''

''Of course I'll wait and see,'' Boyd said. ''I wouldn't miss the end of the world for anything. It ought to be a great spectacle.'' He paused. ''Want them to bring in the next one?''

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''What have we got to lose but our minds? And who is the next one?''

''Borbitsch,'' Boyd said. ''They're saving Garbitsch for a big finish.''

Malone nodded wearily. ''Onward,'' he said, and picked up the phone. He punched a number, spoke a few words and hung up.

A minute later, the four FBI agents came back, leading a man. This one was tall and thin, with the expression of a gloomy, degenerate and slightly nauseated bloodhound. He was led to the chair and he sat down in it as if he expected the worst to start happening at once.

''Well,'' Malone said in a bored, tired voice. ''So this is the one who won't talk.''

**VI**

Midnight.

Kenneth J. Malone sat at his desk, in his Washington office, surrounded by

piles of papers covering the desk, spilling off onto the floor and decorating his lap. He was staring at the papers as if he expected them to leap up, dance round him and shout the solution to all his problems at him in trained choral voices. They did nothing at all.

Seated cross-legged on the rug in the center of the room, and looking like an impossible combination of the last Henry Tudor and Gautama Buddha, Thomas Boyd did nothing either. He was staring downward, his hands folded on his ample lap, wearing an expression of utter, burning frustration. And on a nearby chair sat the third member of the company, wearing the calm and patient expression of the gently born under all vicissitudes: Queen Elizabeth I.

"All right," Malone said into the silence. "Now let's see what we've got."

"I think we've got cerebral paresis," Boyd said. "It's been coming on for years."

"Don't be funny," Malone said.

Boyd gave a short, mirthless bark. "Funny?" he said. "I'm absolutely hysterical with joy and good humor. I'm out of my mind with happiness." He paused. "Anyway," he finished, "I'm out of my mind. Which puts me in good company. The entire FBI, Brubitsch, Borbitsch, Garbitsch, Dr. Thomas O'Connor and Sir Lewis Carter—we're all out of our minds. If we weren't, we'd all move away to the Moon."

"And drink to forget," Malone added. "Sure. But let's try and get some work done."

"By all means, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said. Boyd had not included her in his list of insane people, and she looked slightly miffed. It was hard for Malone to tell whether she was miffed by the mention of insanity, or at being left out.

"Let's review the facts," Malone said. "This whole thing started with some inefficiency in Congress."

"And some upheavals elsewhere." Boyd said. "Labor unions, gangster organizations—"

"Just about all over," Malone said. "And though we've found three spies, it seems pretty obvious that they aren't causing this."

"They aren't causing much of anything," Boyd said. "Except a lot of unbelieving laughter farther up the FBI line. I don't think anybody is going to believe our reports of those interviews."

"But they're true," Her Majesty said.

"Sure they're true," Boyd said. "That's the unbelievable part. They read like farce—and not very good farce at that."

"Oh, I don't know," Malone said. "I think they're pretty funny."

"Shall we get back to the business at hand?" Her Majesty said gently.

"Ah," Malone said. "Anyhow, it isn't the spies. And what we now have is confusion even worse compounded."

"Confounded," Boyd said. "John Milton. 'Paradise Lost.' I heard it somewhere...."

"I don't mean confounded," Malone said. "I mean confusion. Anyhow, the Russian espionage rings in this country seem to be in as bad a state as the Congress, the labor unions, the Syndicates, and all the rest. And all of them seem to have some sort of weird tie-in to these flashes of telepathic interference. Right, Your Majesty?"

"I ... believe so, Sir Kenneth," she said. The old woman looked tired and confused. Somehow, a lot of the brightness seemed to have gone out of her life. "That's right," she said. "I didn't realize there was so much of it going on. You see, Sir Kenneth, you're the only one I can pick up at a distance who has been having these flashes. But now that I'm here in Washington, I can feel it going on all around me."

"It may not have anything to do with everything else," Boyd said.

Malone shook his head. "If it doesn't," he said, "it's the weirdest coincidence I've ever even dreamed about, and my dreams can be pretty strange. No, it's got to be tied in. There's some kind of mental static that is somehow making all these people goof up."

"But why?" Boyd said. "What is it being done for? Just fun?"

"God only knows," Malone said. "But we're going to have to find out."

"In that case," Boyd said, "I suggest lots and lots of prayers."

Her Majesty looked up. "That's a fine idea," she said.

"But God helps those," Malone said, "who help themselves. And we're going to help ourselves. Mostly with facts."

"All right," Boyd said. "So far, all the facts have been a great help."

"Well, here's one," Malone said. "We got one flash each from Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch while we were questioning them. And in each case, that flash occurred just before they started to blab everything they knew. Before the flash, they weren't talking. They were behaving just like good spies and keeping their mouths shut. After the flash, they couldn't talk fast enough."

"That's true," Boyd said reflectively. "They did seem to give up pretty fast, even for amateurs."

Malone nodded. "So the question is this," he said. "Just what happens during those crazy bursts of static?"

He looked expectantly at Her Majesty, but she shook her head sadly. "I don't know," she said. "I simply don't know. It's just noise to me—meaningless noise." She put her hands slowly over her face. "People shouldn't do things like that to their Sovereign," she said in a muffled voice.

Malone got up and went over to her. She wasn't crying, but she wasn't far from

it. He put an arm around her thin shoulders. "Now, look, Your Majesty," he said in gentle tones, "this will all clear up. We'll find out what's going on, and we'll find a way to put a stop to it."

"Sure we will," Boyd said. "After all, Your Majesty, Sir Kenneth and I will work hard on this."

"And the Queen's Own FBI," Malone said, "won't stop until we've finished with this whole affair, once and for all."

Her Majesty brought her hands down from her face, very slowly. She was forcing a smile, but it didn't look too well. "I know you won't fail your Queen," she said. "You two have always been the most loyal of my subjects."

"We'll work hard," Malone said. "No matter how long it takes."

"Because, after all," Boyd said in a musing, thoughtful tone, "it is a serious crime, you know."

The words seemed to have an effect on Her Majesty, like a tonic. For a second her face wore an expression of Royal anger and indignance, and the accustomed strength flowed back into her aged voice. "You're quite correct, Sir Thomas!" she said. "The security of the Throne and the Crown are at stake!"

Malone blinked. "What?" he said. "Are you two talking about something? What crime is this?"

"An extremely serious one," Boyd said in a grave voice. He rose unsteadily to his feet, planted them firmly on the carpet, and frowned.

"Go on," Malone said, fascinated. Her Majesty was watching Boyd with an intent expression.

"The crime," Boyd said, "the very serious crime involved, is that of Threatening the Welfare of the Queen. The criminal has committed the crime of Causing the Said Sovereign, Baselessly, Reasonlessly and Without Consent or Let, to Be in a State of Apprehension for Her Life or Her Well-Being. And this crime—"

"Aha," Malone said. "I've got it. The crime is—"

"High treason," Boyd intoned.

"High treason," Her Majesty said with satisfaction and fire in her voice.

"Very high treason," Malone said. "Extremely high."

"Stratospheric," Boyd agreed. "That is, of course," he added, "if the perpetrators of this dastardly crime are Her Majesty's subjects."

"My goodness," the Queen said. "I never thought of that. Suppose they're not?"

"Then," Malone said in his most vibrant voice, "it is an Act of War."

"Steps," Boyd said, "must be taken."

"We must do our utmost," Malone said. "Sir Thomas—"

"Yes, Sir Kenneth?" Boyd said.

"This task requires our most fervent dedication," Malone said. "Please come with me."

He went to the desk. Boyd followed him, walking straight-backed and tall. Malone bent and removed from a drawer of the desk a bottle of bourbon. He closed the drawer, poured some bourbon into two handy water glasses from the desk, and capped the bottle. He handed one of the water glasses to Boyd, and raised the other one aloft.

"Sir Thomas," Malone said, "I give you—Her Majesty, the Queen!"

"To the Queen!" Boyd echoed.

They downed their drinks and turned, as one man, to hurl the glasses into the wastebasket.

In thinking it over later, Malone realized that he hadn't considered anything about that moment silly at all. Of course, an outsider might have been slightly surprised at the sequence of events, but Malone was no outsider. And, after all, it was the proper way to treat a Queen, wasn't it?

And—

When Malone had first met Her Majesty, he had wondered why, although she could obviously read minds, and so knew perfectly well that neither Malone nor Boyd believed she was Queen Elizabeth I, she insisted on an outward show of respect and dedication. He'd asked her about it at last, and her reply had been simple, reasonable and to the point.

According to her—and Malone didn't doubt it for an instant—most people simply didn't think their superiors were all they claimed to be. But they acted as if they did—at least while in the presence of those superiors. It was a common fiction, a sort of handy oil on the wheels of social intercourse.

And all Her Majesty had ever insisted on was the same sort of treatment.

"Bless you," she'd said, "I can't help the way you think, but, as Queen, I do have some control over the way you act."

The funny thing, as far as Malone was concerned, was that the two parts of his personality were becoming more and more alike. He didn't actually believe that Her Majesty was Queen Elizabeth I, and he hoped fervently that he never would. But he did have a great deal of respect for her, and more affection than he had believed possible at first. She was the grandmother Malone had never known; she was good, and kind, and he wanted to keep her happy and contented. There had been nothing at all phony in the solemn toast he had proposed—nor in the righteous indignation he had felt against anyone who was giving Her Majesty even a minute's worth of discomfort.

And Boyd, surprisingly enough, seemed to feel the same way. Malone felt good about that; Her Majesty needed all the loyal supporters she could get.

But all of this was later. At the time, Malone was doing nothing except what came naturally—nor, apparently, was Boyd. After the glasses had been thrown, with a terrifying crash, into the metal wastebasket, and the reverberations of that second had stopped ringing in their ears, a moment of silence had followed.

Then Boyd turned, briskly rubbing his hands. "All right," he said. "Let's get back to work."

Malone looked at the proud, happy look on Her Majesty's face; he saw the glimmer of a tear in the corner of each eye. But he gave no indication that he had noticed anything at all out of the ordinary.

"Fine," he said. "Now, getting on back to the facts, we've established something, anyhow. Some agency is causing flashes of telepathic static all over the place. And those flashes are somehow connected with the confusion that's going on all around us. Somehow, these flashes have an effect on the minds of people."

"And we know at least one manifestation of that effect," Boyd said. "It makes spies blab all their secrets when they're exposed to it."

"These three spies, anyhow," Malone said.

"If 'spies' is the right word," Boyd said.

"O.K.," Malone said. "And now we've got another obvious question."

"It seems to me we've got about twelve," Boyd said.

"I mean: who's doing it?" Malone said. "Who is causing these telepathic flashes?"

"Maybe it's just happening," Boyd said. "Out of thin air."

"Maybe," Malone said. "But let's go on the assumption that there's a human cause. The other way, we can't do a thing except sit back and watch the world go to hell."

Boyd nodded. "It doesn't seem to be the Russians," he said. "Although, of course, it might be a Red herring."

"What do you mean?" Malone said.

"Well," Boyd said, "they might have known we were on to Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch—" He stopped. "You know," he said, "every time I say that name I have to reassure myself that we're not all walking around in the world of Florenz Ziegfeld?"

"Likewise," Malone said. "But go on."

"Sure," Boyd said. "Anyhow, they might have set the three of them up as patsies—just in case we stumbled on to this mess. We can't overlook that possibility."

"Right," Malone said. "It's faint, but it is a possibility. In other words, the agency behind the flashes might be Russian, and it might not be Russian."

"That clears that up nicely," Boyd said. "Next question?"

"The next one," Malone said grimly, "is: what's behind the flashes? Some sort of psionic power is causing them—that much is obvious."

"I'll go along with that," Boyd said. "I have to go along with it. But don't think I like it."

"Nobody likes it," Malone said. "But let's go on. O'Connor isn't any help; he washes his hands of the whole business."

"Lucky man," Boyd said.

"He says that it can't be happening," Malone said, "and if it is we're all screwy. Now, right or wrong, that isn't an opinion that gives us any handle to work with."

"No," Boyd said reflectively. "A certain amount of comfort, to be sure, but no handles."

"Sir Lewis Carter, on the other hand—" Malone said. He fumbled through some of the piles of paper until he had located the ones the President of the Psychical Research Society had sent. "Sir Lewis Carter," he went on, "does seem to be doing some pretty good work. At least, some of the more modern stuff he sent over looks pretty solid. They've been doing quite a bit of research into the subject, and their theories seem to be all right, or nearly all right, to me. Of course, I'm not an expert—"

"Who is?" Boyd said. "Except for O'Connor, of course."

"Well, somebody is," Malone said. "Whoever's doing all this, for instance. And the theories do seem O.K. In most cases, for instance, they agree with O'Connor's work—though they're not in complete agreement."

"I should think so," Boyd said. "O'Connor wouldn't recognize an Astral Plane if TWA were putting them into service."

"I don't mean that sort of thing," Malone said. "There's lots about astral bodies and ghosts, ectoplasm, Transcendental Yoga, theosophy, deros, the Great Pyramid, Atlantis, and other such pediculous pets. That's just silly, as far as I can see. But what they have to say about parapsychology and psionics as such does seem to be reasonably accurate."

"I suppose so," Boyd said tiredly.

"O.K., then," Malone said. "Did anybody notice anything in that pile of stuff that might conceivably have any bearing whatever on our problems?"

"I did," Boyd said. "Or I think I did."

"You both did," Her Majesty said. "And so did I, when I looked through it. But I didn't bother with it. I dismissed it."

"Why?" Malone said.

"Because I don't think it's true," she said. "However, my opinion is really only an opinion." She smiled around at the others.

Malone picked up a thick sheaf of papers from one of the piles of his desk.

"Let's get straight what it is we're talking about," he said. "All right?"

"Anything's all right with me," Boyd said. "I'm easy to please."

Malone nodded. "Now, this writer ... what's his name?" he said. He glanced at the copy of the cover page. "'Minds and Morons'," he read. "By Cartier Taylor."

"Great title," Boyd said. "Does he say which is which?"

"Let's get back to serious business," Malone said, giving Boyd a single look. There was silence for a second, and then Malone said: "He mentions something, in the book, that he calls 'telepathic projection.' As far as I understand what he's talking about, that's some method of forcing your thoughts on another person." He glanced over at the Queen. "Now, Your Majesty," he said, "you don't think it's true—and that may only be an opinion, but it's a pretty informed one. It seems to me as if Taylor makes a good case for this 'telepathic projection' of his. Why don't you think so?"

"Because," Her Majesty said flatly, "it doesn't work."

"You've tried it?" Boyd put in.

"I have," she said. "And I have had no success with it at all. It's a complete failure."

"Now, wait a minute," Boyd said. "Just a minute."

"What's the matter?" Malone said. "Have you tried it, and made it work?"

Boyd snorted. "Fat chance," he said. "I just want to look at the thing, that's all." He held out his hand, and Malone gave him the sheaf of papers. Boyd leafed through them slowly, stopping every now and again to consult a page, until he found what he was looking for. "There," he said.

"There, what?" Malone said.

"Listen to this," Boyd said. "'For those who draw the line at demonic possession, I suggest trying telepathic projection. Apparently, it is possible to project one's own thoughts directly into the mind of another—even to the point of taking control of the other's mind. Hypnotism? You tell me, and we'll both know. Ever since the orthodox scientists have come around to accepting hypnotism, I've been chary of it. Maybe there really is an astral body or a soul that a person has stashed about him somewhere—something that he can send out to take control of another human being. But I, personally, prefer the telepathic projection theory. All you have to do is squirt your thoughts across space and spray them all over the fellow's brain. Presto-bingo, he does pretty much what you want him to do.'"

"That's the quote I was thinking of," Malone said.

"Of course it is," Her Majesty said. "But it really doesn't work. I've tried it."

"How have you tried it?" Malone said.

"There were many times, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said, "when I wanted someone to do something particular—for me, or for some other person. After all, you

must remember that I was in a hospital for a long time. Of course, that represents only a short segment of my life span, but it seemed long to me.''

Malone, who was trying to view the years from age fifteen to age sixty-odd as a short segment of anybody's lifetime, remembered with a shock that this was not Rose Thompson speaking. It was Queen Elizabeth I, who had never died.

''That's right, Sir Kenneth,'' she said kindly. ''And in that hospital, there were a number of times when I wanted one of the doctors or nurses to do what I wanted them to. I tried many times, but I never succeeded.''

Boyd nodded his head. ''Well—'' he began.

''Oh, yes, Sir Thomas,'' Her Majesty said. ''What you're thinking is certainly possible. It may even be true.''

''What is he thinking?'' Malone said.

''He thinks,'' Her Majesty said, ''that I may not have the talent for this particular effect—and perhaps I don't. But, talent or not, I know what's possible and what isn't. And the way Mr. Taylor describes it is simply silly, that's all. And unladylike. Imagine any self-respecting lady 'squirting' her thoughts about in space!''

''Well,'' Malone said carefully, ''aside from its being unladylike—''

''Sir Kenneth,'' Her Majesty said, ''you are not telepathic. Neither is Sir Thomas.''

''I'm nothing,'' Boyd said. ''I don't even exist.''

''And it is very difficult to explain to the nontelepath just what Mr. Taylor is implying,'' Her Majesty went on imperturbably. ''Before you could inject any thoughts into anyone else's mind, you'd have to be able to see into that mind. Is that correct?''

''I guess so,'' Malone said.

''And in order to do that, you'd have to be telepathic,'' Her Majesty said. ''Am I correct?''

''Correct,'' Malone said.

''Well, then,'' Her Majesty said with satisfaction, and beamed at him.

A second passed.

''Well, then, what?'' Malone said in confusion.

''Telepathy,'' Her Majesty said patiently, ''is an extremely complex affair. It involves a sort of meshing with the mind of this other person. It has nothing—absolutely nothing—in common with this simple 'squirting' of thoughts across space, as if they were orange pips you were trying to put into a wastebasket. No, Sir Kenneth, I cannot believe in what Mr. Taylor says.''

''But it's still possible,'' Malone said.

''Oh,'' Her Majesty said, ''it's certainly possible. But I should think that if any

telepaths were around, and if they were changing people's minds by 'squirting' at them, I would know it."

Malone frowned. "Maybe you would at that," he said. "I guess you would."

"Not to mention," Boyd put in, "that if you were going to control everything we've come across like that you'd need an awful lot of telepathic operators."

"That's true," Malone admitted. "And the objections seem to make some sense. But what else is there to go on?"

"I don't know," Boyd said. "I haven't the faintest idea. And I'm rapidly approaching the stage where I don't care."

"Well," Malone said, heaving a sigh, "let's keep looking."

He bent down and picked up another sheaf of copies from the Psychical Research Society.

"After all," he said, without much hope, "you never know."

**VII**

Malone looked around the office of Andrew J. Burris as if he'd never seen it before. He felt tired, and worn out, and depressed; it had been a long night, and here it was morning and the head of the FBI was talking to him about his report. It was, Malone told himself heavily, a hell of a life.

"Now, Malone," Burris said in a kindly voice, "this is a very interesting report."

"Yes, sir," Malone said automatically.

"A very interesting report indeed, Kenneth," Burris went on, positively bursting with good-fellowship.

"Thank you, sir," Malone said dully.

Burris beamed a little more. "You've done a fine job," he said, "a really fine job. Hardly on the job any time at all, and here you've managed to get all three of the culprits responsible."

"Now, wait a minute," Malone said in sudden panic. "That isn't what I said."

"No?" Burris said, looking a little surprised.

"Not at all," Malone said. "I don't think those three spies have anything to do with this at all. Not a thing."

There was a brief silence, during which Burris' surprise seemed to expand like a gas and fill the room. "But they've confessed," he said at last. "Their job was to try and get information, and also to disrupt our own work here."

"I know all that," Malone said. "But—"

Burris held up a pink, patient hand. Malone stared at it, fascinated. It had five pink, patient fingers on it. "Malone," Burris said slowly, "just what's bothering

you? Don't you think those men are spies? Is that it?''

''Spies?'' Malone said, slightly confused.

''You know,'' Burris said. ''The men you arrested, Malone. The men you wrote this report about.''

Malone blinked and focused on the hand again. It still had five fingers. ''Sure they are,'' he said. ''They're spies, all right. And they're caught, and that's that. Except I don't think they're causing all the confusion around here.''

''Well, of course they're not,'' Burris said, the beam of kindliness coming back to his face. ''Not any more. You caught them.''

''I mean,'' Malone said desperately, ''they never were. Even before I caught them.''

''Then why,'' Burris said with great patience, ''did you arrest them?''

''Because they're spies,'' Malone said. ''Besides, I didn't.''

''Didn't what?'' Burris said, looking confused. He seemed to realize he was still holding up his hand, and dropped it to the desk. Malone felt sad as he watched it go. Now he had nothing to concentrate on except the conversation, and he didn't even want to think about what was happening to that.

''Didn't arrest them,'' he said. ''Tom Boyd did.''

''Acting,'' Burris pointed out gently, ''under your orders, Kenneth.''

It was the second time Burris had called him Kenneth, Malone realized. It started a small warning bell in the back of his mind. When Burris called him by his first name, Burris was feeling paternal and kindly. And that, Malone thought determinedly, boded Kenneth J. Malone very little good indeed.

''He was under my orders to arrest them because they were spies,'' he said at last. He wondered if the sentence made any real sense, but shrugged his shoulders and plunged on. ''But they're not the real spies,'' he said. ''Not the ones everybody's been looking for.''

''Kenneth,'' Burris said, his voice positively dripping with what Malone thought of as the heavy, Grade A, Government-inspected cream of human kindness, ''all the confusion with the computer-secretaries has stopped. Everything is running fine in that department.''

''But—'' Malone began.

''The technicians,'' Burris said, hypnotized by this poem of beauty, ''aren't making any more mistakes. The information is flowing through beautifully. It's a pleasure to see their reports. Believe me, Kenneth—''

''Call me Chief,'' Malone said wearily.

Burris blinked. ''What?'' he said. ''Oh. Ha. Indeed. Very well, then: Malone, what more proof do you want?''

''Is that proof?'' Malone said. ''The spies didn't even confess to that. They—''

"Of course they didn't, Malone," Burris said.

"Of course?" Malone said weakly.

"Look at their confessions," Burris said. "Just look at them, in black and white." He reached for a sheaf of papers and pushed them across the desk. Malone looked at them. They were indeed, he told himself, in black and white. There was no arguing with that. None at all.

"Well?" Burris said after a second.

"I don't see anything about computer-secretaries," Malone said.

"The Russians," Burris began slowly, "are not stupid, Malone. You believe that, don't you?"

"Of course I believe it," Malone said. "Otherwise we wouldn't need an FBI."

Burris frowned. "There are still domestic cases," he said. "Like juvenile delinquents stealing cars inter-state, for instance. If you remember." He paused, then went on: "But the fact remains: Russians are not stupid. Not by a long shot."

"All right," Malone said agreeably.

"Do you really think, then," Burris said instantly, "that a spy ring could be as utterly inefficient as the one described in those confessions?"

"Lots of people are inefficient," Malone said.

"Not spies," Burris said with decision. "Do you really believe that the Russians would send over a bunch of operatives as clodheaded as these are pretending to be?"

"People make mistakes," Malone said weakly.

"Russian spies," Burris said, "do not make mistakes. Or, anyhow, we can't depend on it. We have to depend on the fact that they're operating at peak efficiency, Malone. Peak."

Malone nearly asked: "Where?" but controlled himself at the last minute. Instead, he said: "But the confessions are right there. And, according to the confessions—"

"Do you really believe," Burris said, "that a trio of Soviet agents would confess everything as easily as all that if they didn't intend to get something out of it? Such as, for instance, covering up their methods of doing damage? And do you really believe—"

Malone began to feel as if he were involved in the Athanasian Creed. "I don't think the spies are the real spies," he said stubbornly. "I mean the spies we're all looking for."

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me," Burris went on inexorably, "that you take the word of spies when they tell you about their own activities?"

"Their confessions—"

"Spies can lie, Malone," Burris said gently. "As a matter of fact, they usually do. We have come to depend on it as one of the facts of life."

"But Queen Elizabeth," Malone said stubbornly, "told me they weren't lying." As he finished the sentence, he suddenly realized what it sounded like. "You know Queen Elizabeth," he said chummily.

"The Virgin Queen," Burris said helpfully.

"I wouldn't know," Malone said, feeling uncomfortable. "I mean Rose Thompson. She thinks she's Queen Elizabeth and I just said it that way because—"

"It's all right, Malone," Burris said softly. "I know who you mean."

"Well, then," Malone said. "If Queen Elizabeth says the spies aren't lying, then—"

"Then nothing," Burris said flatly. "Miss Rose Thompson is a nice, sweet, little old lady. I admit that."

"And she's been a lot of help," Malone said.

"I admit that, too," Burris said. "But she is also somewhat battier, Malone, than the entire Order Chiroptera, including Count Dracula and all his happy friends."

"She only thinks she's Queen Elizabeth I," Malone said defensively.

"That," Burris said, "is a large sort of only. Malone, you've got to look at the facts sensibly. Square in the face."

Malone pictured a lot of facts going by with square faces. He didn't like the picture. "All right," he said.

"Things are going wrong in the Congressional computer-secretaries," Burris said. "So I assign you to the case. You come back to me with three spies, and the trouble stops. And what other information have you got?"

"Plenty," Malone said, and stopped for thought. There was a long pause.

"All this business about mysterious psionic faculties," Burris said, "comes direct from the testimony of that sweet little old twitch. Which she is. Dr. O'Connor, for instance, has told you in so many words that there's no such thing as this mysterious force. And if you don't want to take the word of the nation's foremost authority, there's this character from the Psychical Research Society—Carter, or whatever his name is. Carter told you he'd never heard of such a thing."

"But that doesn't mean there isn't such a thing," Malone said.

"Even your own star witness," Burris said, "even the Queen herself, told you it couldn't be done."

"Nevertheless—" Malone began. But he felt puzzled. There was no way, he decided, to finish a sentence that started with nevertheless. It was the wrong kind of word.

"What are you trying to do?" Burris said. "Beat your head against a stone wall?"

Malone realized that that was just what he felt like. Of course, Burris thought the stone wall was his psionic theory. Malone knew that the stone wall was Andrew J. Burris. But it didn't matter, he thought confusedly. Where there's a stone, there's a way.

"I feel," he said carefully, "like a man with a stone head."

"And I don't blame you," Burris said in an understanding tone. "Here you are trying to make evidence to fit your theories. What real evidence is there, Malone, that these three spies ... these three comic-opera spies—are innocent?"

"What evidence is there that they're guilty?" Malone said. "Now, listen, Chief.."

"Don't call me Chief," Burris murmured.

"Another five minutes," Malone said in a sudden rage, "and I won't even call you."

"Malone!" Burris said.

Malone swallowed hard. "Sorry," he said at last. "But isn't it just barely possible that these three spies aren't the real criminals? Suppose you were a spy."

"All right," Burris said. "I'm a spy." Something in his tone made Malone look at him with a sudden suspicion. Burris, he thought, was humoring him.

Is it possible, Malone asked himself, that I am the one who is as a little child?

Little children, he told himself with decision, do not capture Russian spies and then argue about it. They go home, eat supper and go to bed.

He stopped thinking about sleep in a hurry, and got back to the business at hand. "If you were a spy," he said, "and you knew that a lot of other spies had been arrested and charged with the crimes you were committing, what would you do?"

Burris appeared to think deeply. "I would celebrate," he said at last, in a judicious tone.

"I mean, would you just go on with the same crimes?" Malone said.

"What are you talking about, Malone?" Burris said cautiously.

"If you knew we'd arrested Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch," Malone went on doggedly, "you'd lay off for a while, just to make us think we'd caught the right men. Doesn't that make sense?"

"Of course it makes sense," Burris said in what was almost a pitying tone. "But don't push it too far. Malone, I want you to know something."

Malone sighed. "Yes, sir?" he said.

"Contrary to popular opinion," Burris said, "I was not appointed Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation just because I own a Hoover vacuum cleaner."

"Of course not," Malone said, feeling that something of the sort was called for.

"And I think you ought to know by now," Burris went on, "that I wouldn't fall for

a trick like that any more than you would. There are obviously more members in this spy ring. Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch are just a start.''

''Well, then—'' Malone began.

''I'm not going to be taken in by what these three say,'' Burris said. ''But now, Malone, we know what to look for. All we have to do is pretend to be taken in. Get it?''

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''We pretend to be taken in. And in the meantime I can go on looking for—''

''We don't have to look for anything,'' Burris said calmly.

Malone took a deep breath. Somehow, he told himself, things were not working out very well. ''But the other spies—''

''The next time they try anything,'' Burris said, ''we'll be able to reach out and pick them up as easy as falling off a log.''

''It's the wrong log!'' Malone said.

Burris folded his hands on the desk and looked at them for a second, frowning slightly like a psychiatrist. ''Malone,'' he said at last, ''I want you to listen to me. Calmly. Coolly. Collectedly.''

Malone shrugged. ''All right,'' he said. ''I'm calm and cool.''

''And collected,'' Burris added.

''That, too,'' Malone said vaguely.

''Malone,'' Burris began, ''you've got to get rid of this idea that everything the FBI investigates these days is somehow linked with psionics. I know you've done a lot of work in that connection—''

''Now, wait a minute,'' Malone said. ''There are those errors. How did the technicians feed the wrong data into the machines?''

''Errors do happen,'' Burris said. ''If I slip on a banana peel, do I blame psionics? Do I even blame the United Fruit Growers? I do not, Malone. Instead, I tell myself that errors do happen. All the time.''

''Now,'' Malone said, ''you've contradicted yourself.''

''I have?'' Burris said with a look of complete surprise.

''Sure,'' Malone said. He leaned forward across the desk. ''If the errors were just ordinary accidental errors, then how were the spies responsible? And why did they stop after the spies were arrested? When you slip on a banana peel, does it matter whether or not the United Fruit Growers are out on strike?''

''Oh,'' Burris said.

''You see?'' Malone said. ''You've gone and contradicted yourself.'' He felt victorious, but somewhere in the back of his mind was the horrible sensation that someone was about to come up behind him and hit him on the head with a wet

sock full of old sand.

A long second passed. Then Burris said: "Oh. Malone, I forgot to give you the analysis report."

That, Malone realized dimly, was supposed to be the wet sock. Fate, he told himself, was against him. Anyhow, something was against him. It was a few seconds before he came to the conclusion that what he had heard didn't really make any sense. "Analysis report?" he said.

"On the water cooler," Burris explained cheerfully.

"There is an analysis report on a water cooler," Malone said. "Everything now becomes as clear as crystal." He heard his voice begin to rise. "You analyzed a water cooler and discovered that it was a Siberian spy in disguise," he said, trying to make himself sound less hysterical.

"No, no," Burris said, pushing at Malone with his palms. "The water in it, Malone. The water in it."

"No Siberian spy," Malone said with decision, "could disguise himself as the water in a water cooler."

"I didn't say that," Burris went on. "But what do you think was in that water cooler, Malone?"

"Water," Malone said. "Cool water."

"Congratulations," Burris said, in the hearty tones usually reserved for announcers on programs where housewives win trips to Nome. "You are just a shade less than ninety-nine point nine nine per cent correct."

"The rest of the water," Malone hazarded, "was warm?"

"The rest of the water," Burris said, "wasn't water. Aside from the usual minerals, there was also a trace of one of the psychodrugs."

The word seemed to hang in mid-air, like somebody's sword. Malone knew perfectly well what the psychodrugs were. Over the past twenty years, a great number of them had been developed by confused and anxious researchers. Some were solids, some liquids and a few gaseous at normal temperatures. Some were weak and some were highly potent. Some were relatively innocuous, and quite a few were as deadly as any of the more common poisons. They could be administered by mouth, by injection, by spray, as drops, grains, whiffs or in any other way conceivable to medical science. But they all had one thing in common. They affected the mental functioning—what seemed to be the personality itself—of the person dosed with them.

The effect of the drugs was, in most cases, highly specific. One might make a normally brave man a craven coward; laboratory tests on that one had presented the interesting spectacle of terrified cats running from surprised, but by no means displeased, experimental mice. Another drug reversed this picture, and made

the experimental mice mad with power. They attacked cats in battalions or singly, cheering and almost waving large flags as they went over the top, completely foolhardy in the presence of any danger whatever. Others made man abnormally suspicious and still others disassociated judgment to the point where all decisions were made completely at random.

The FBI had a large file on psychodrugs, Malone knew. But he didn't need the file to see what was coming. He asked the question anyhow, just for the record: "What particular psychodrug was this one?"

"One of the judgment-warpers," Burris said. "Haenlingen's Mixture; it's more or less a new development, but the Russians probably know as much about it as we do. In large doses, the drug affects even the automatic nervous system and throws the involuntary functions out of whack; but it isn't usually used in killing amounts."

"And in the water cooler?" Malone asked.

"There wasn't much of it," Burris said, "but there was enough. The technicians could be depended on to make a great many more mistakes than usual—just how many we can't determine, but the order of magnitude seems about right. It would depend on how much water each one of them drank, of course, and we haven't a chance of getting anything like a precise determination of that now."

"Oh," Malone said. "But it comes out about right, doesn't it?" He felt hopeless.

"Just about," Burris said cheerfully. "And since it was Brubitsch's job to change the cooler jug—"

"Wait a minute," Malone said. "I think I see a hole in that."

"Really?" Burris said. He frowned slightly.

Malone nodded. "Sure," he said. "If any of the spies drank the water—their judgment would be warped, too, wouldn't it?"

"So they didn't drink the water," Burris said easily.

"How can we be sure?" Malone asked.

Burris shrugged. "Why do we have to be?" he said. "Malone, you've got to stop pressing so hard on this."

"But a man who didn't drink water all day would be a little conspicuous," Malone said. "After a while, anyhow."

Burris sighed. "The man is a janitor, Kenneth," he said. "Do you know what a janitor is?"

"Don't baby me," Malone snapped.

Burris shrugged. "A janitor doesn't work in the office with the men," he said. "He can drink out of a faucet in the broom closet—or wherever the faucets might be. Nobody would notice. Nobody would think it odd."

Malone said: "But—" and stopped and thought it over. "All right," he went on

at last. "But I still insist—"

"Now, Kenneth," Burris said in a voice that dripped oil. "I'll admit that psionics is new and wonderful and you've done a lot of fine work with it. A lot of very fine work indeed. But you can't go around blaming everything on psionics no matter what it is or how much sense it makes."

"I don't," Malone said, injured. "But—"

"But you do," Burris said. "Lately, you've been acting as though magic were loose in the world. As though nothing were dependable any more."

"It's not magic," Malone said.

"But it is," Burris told him, "when you use it as an explanation for anything and everything." He paused, "Kenneth," he said in a more kindly tone, "don't think I blame you. I know how hard you've been working. I know how much time and effort you've put into the gallant fight against this country's enemies."

Malone closed his eyes and turned slightly green. "It was nothing," he said at last. He opened his eyes but nothing had changed. Burris' expression was still kindly and concerned.

"Oh, but it was," Burris said. "Something, I mean. You've been working very hard and you're just not at peak efficiency any more. You need a rest, Kenneth. A nice rest."

"I do not," Malone said indignantly.

"A lovely rest," Burris went on, oblivious. "Somewhere peaceful and quiet, where you can just sit around and think peacefully about peaceful things. Oh, it ought to be wonderful for you, Kenneth. A nice, peaceful, lovely, wonderful vacation."

Through the haze of adjectives, Malone remembered dimly the last time Burris had offered him a vacation in that tone of voice. It had turned out to be one of the toughest cases he'd ever had: the case of the teleporting delinquents.

"Nice?" Malone said. "Peaceful? Lovely? Wonderful? I can see it now."

"What do you mean, Malone?" Burris said.

"What am I going to get?" Malone said. "A nice easy job like arresting all the suspected nose-pickers in Mobile, Alabama?"

Burris choked and recovered quickly. "No," he said. "No, no, no. I mean it. You've earned a vacation, Kenneth, a real vacation. A nice, peaceful—"

"Lovely, wonderful vacation," Malone said. "But—"

"You're one of my best agents," Burris said. "I might almost say you're my top man. My very top man. And because of that I've been overworking you."

"But—"

"Now, now," Burris said, waving a hand vaguely. "I have been overworking you, Kenneth, and I'm sorry. I want to make amends."

"A what?" Malone said, feeling confused again.

"Amends," Burris said. "I want to do something for you."

Malone thought about that for a second. Burris was well-meaning, all right, but from the way the conversation was going it looked very much as if "vacation" weren't going to be the right word.

The right word, he thought dismally, was going to be "rest home." Or possibly even "insane asylum."

"I don't want to stop work," he said grimly. "Really, I don't."

"You'll have lots of time to yourself," Burns said in a wheedling tone.

Malone nodded. "Sure I will," he said. "Until they come and put me in a wet pack."

Burris blinked, but recovered gamely. "You don't have to go swimming," he said, "if you don't want to go swimming. Up in the mountains, for instance—"

"Where there are nice big guards to watch everything," Malone said. "And nuts."

"Guides," Burris said. "But you could just sit around and take things easy."

"All locked up," Malone said. "Sure. I'll love it."

"If you want to go out," Burris said, "you can go out. Anywhere. Just do whatever you feel like doing."

Malone sighed. "O.K.," he said. "When do the men in the white coats arrive?"

"White coats?" Burris said. There was a short silence. "Kenneth," he said, "don't suspect me of trying to do anything to you. This is my way of doing you a favor. It would just be a vacation—going anywhere you want to go, doing anything you want to do."

"Avacado," Malone muttered at random.

Burris stared. "What?"

"Nothing," Malone said shamefacedly. "An old song. It runs through my mind. And when you said that about going where I want to go—"

"An old song with avacados in it?" Burris said.

Malone cleared his throat and burst into shy and slightly hoarse song.

"Avacado go where you go," he piped feebly, "do what you do—"

"Oh," Burris said. "Oh, my."

"Sorry," Malone muttered. He took a breath and waited. A second passed.

"Well, Kenneth," Burris said at last, with an attempt at heartiness, "you can do anything you like. The mountains. The seashore. Hawaii. The Riviera. Just go and forget all about gangsters, spies, counter-espionage, kidnapings, mad telepaths, juvenile teleports and anything else like that."

"You forgot water coolers," Malone said.

Burris nodded. "And water coolers," he said, "by all means. Forget about FBI business. Forget about me. Just relax."

It did sound appealing, Malone told himself. But there was a case to finish, and he was sure Burris was finishing it wrong. He wanted to argue about it some more, but he was fresh out of arguments.

And besides, the idea of being able to forget all about Andrew J. Burris for a little while was almost insidious. Malone liked it more the more he thought about it. Burris went on naming vacation spots and drawing magnificent travel-agency pictures of how wonderful life could be, and after a while Malone left. There just wasn't anything else to say. Burris had given him an order for his vacation pay and another guaranteeing travel expenses. Not, he thought glumly, that he would be expected to buy return tickets. Oh, no. Once he'd been to a place he could teleport back, so there would be no point in taking a plane or a train back from wherever he went.

"And suppose I like planes and trains?" he muttered, going on down the hall. But there was nothing he could do about it. He did think of looking for some sympathy, at least, but he couldn't even get much of that. Tom Boyd had apparently already talked to Burris, and was in full agreement with him.

"After all," Boyd said, "there's the drug in the water—and it looks like pretty solid proof to me, Ken."

"It's not proof of anything," Malone said sourly.

"Sure it is," Boyd said. "Why would anybody put it there otherwise?"

Malone shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "But I'm not surprised you like Burris' theory. Psionics never did make you very happy, did it?"

"Not very," Boyd admitted. "This way, anyhow, I've got something I can cope with. And it makes nice, simple sense. No reason to go and complicate it, Ken. None at all."

Glumly, Malone made his farewells and then teleported himself from the Justice Department Building back to his own apartment. There, slowly and sadly, he began to pack. He hadn't yet decided just where he was going, but that was a minor detail. The important thing was that he was going. If the Director of the FBI tells you that you need a rest cure, Malone thought, you do not argue with him. Argument may result in your vacation being extended indefinitely. And that is not a good thing.

Of course, such a "vacation" wouldn't be the end of the world. Not quite. He could even beat Burris to the gun, hand in his resignation and go into private practice as a lawyer. The name of Malone, he told himself proudly, had not been entirely forgotten in Chicago, by any means. But he didn't feel happy about the idea. He knew, perfectly well, that he didn't want to live by trading on his father's reputation. And besides, he liked being an FBI agent. It had glamour. It had standing.

It had everything. It even had trouble.

Malone caught his whirling mind and forced it back to a landing. Where, he asked himself, was he going?

He thought about that for a second. Perhaps, as Burris had apparently suspected, he was going nuts. When he considered it, it even sounded like a good possibility.

After all, what evidence did he have for his psionic theory? Her Majesty had told him about those peculiar bursts of metal energy, true. But there wasn't anything else. And, come to think of it, wasn't it possible that Her Majesty had slipped just a little off the trolley of her one-track psychosis?

At that thought a quick wave of guilt swept through him. Her Majesty, after all, might be reading his mind from Yucca Flats, where she had returned the previous night, right at that moment. He felt as if he had committed high, middle and low treason all in one great big package, not to mention Jack and the Game, he added disconsolately.

"Nevertheless," he muttered, and stopped. He blinked and started over again. In spite of all that, he told himself, the Burris Theory certainly looked a lot sounder when you considered it objectively.

The big question was whether or not he wanted to consider it objectively. But he put this aside for the future, and continued packing slowly and carefully. When at last he snapped shut the last suitcase, he still hadn't made up his mind as to the best spot for a vacation. Images tumbled through his brain: mountains, seacoasts, beaches, beautiful native girls and even a few insane asylums. But nothing definite appeared. He sat down in his favorite easychair, found a cigar and lit it, and luxuriated in the soothing fumes while his mind began to wander.

Her Majesty, he was quite certain, wouldn't lie purposely. Granted, she had misled him now and again, but even when she felt misleading necessary she hadn't lied; she had merely juggled the truth a little. And Malone was sure she would continue to tell him the truth as she knew it.

Of course, that was the stopper: as she knew it. And she might have developed another delusion. In which case, he thought sadly, Burris was very probably right.

But she might also be telling the actual truth. And that meant, Malone thought, that little pops of energy were occasionally bursting in various minds. These little pops had an effect, or an apparent effect: they made people change their minds about doing one thing or another.

And that meant—Malone stopped, his cigar halfway to his mouth.

Wasn't it possible that just such a burst of energy had made Burris call him off the case?

It seemed like a long time before the cigar reached his mouth. Malone felt slightly appalled. The flashes that had been going on in his own mind had already been bothering him, and he'd decided that he'd have to check every decision he made to be sure that it was not capricious; now he made a resolve that he'd kept his mental faculties on a perpetual watch for that sort of interference. Of course, it was more than barely possible that he wouldn't notice it if anything happened. But it would be pretty stupid to succumb to that sort of defeatism now, he told himself grimly.

Now that everything was narrowing down so nicely, anyhow, he thought. There were only two real possibilities. Malone numbered them in his mind:

1. Her Majesty has developed a new delusion. In this case, he thought, Burris was perfectly right. I can enjoy a month of free vacation.

2. Her Majesty is no nuttier than before. If this is the case, he thought, then there's more to the case than has appeared, and Kenneth J. Malone, with or without the FBI, is going to get to the bottom of it.

Therefore, he summed up, everything now hinged on whether or not Her Majesty was unhinged.

That was confusing, but he managed to straighten it out after a second. He put his half-smoked cigar carefully in an ashtray and stood up. He went over to the phone and dialed the special unlisted number of the FBI.

The face that appeared was faintly sallow and looked sad. "Pelham here," it said in the tones of a discouraged horse.

"Hello, Pelham," Malone said. "Kenneth Malone here."

"Trouble?" Pelham said. It was obvious that he expected trouble, and always had, and probably always would.

"Nope," Malone said. Pelham looked even sadder. "Just checking out for vacation. You can tell the Chief I'm going to take off for Las Vegas. I'm taking his advice, tell him; I'm going to carouse and throw my money away and look at dancing girls and smoke and drink and stay out late. I'll let the local office know where I'm staying when I get there, just in case something comes up."

"O.K.," Pelham said unhappily. "I'll check you out." He tried a smile, but it looked more like the blank expression on the face of a local corpse. "Have fun," he said.

"Thanks," Malone said. "I'll try."

But his precognitive sense suddenly rose up on its hind legs as he broke the connection. The attempt to have fun, it told him in no uncertain terms, was going to be a morbid failure.

"Nevertheless," Malone muttered, heaved a great sigh, and started for the suitcase and the door.

## VIII

The Great Universal was not the tops in every field. Not by a long shot. As Las Vegas resorts went, as a matter of fact, almost any of them could outdo the Great Universal in one respect or another. The Golden Palace, for instance, had much gaudier gaming rooms. The Moonbeam had a louder orchestra. The Barbary Coast and the Ringing Welkin both had more slot machines, and it was undeniable that the Flower of the West had fatter and pinker dancing girls. The Red Hot, the Last Fling and the Double Star all boasted more waiters and more famous guests per square foot of breathable air.

But the Great Universal, in sheer size, volume of business and elegance of surroundings, outdid any three of the others combined. It stood grandly alone at the edge of the Strip, the grandiloquent Las Vegas version of Broadway or Hollywood Boulevard. It had a central Tower that climbed thirty stories into the clean desert air, and the Tower was surrounded by a quarter of a square mile of single-level structures. At the base, the building spread out for five hundred feet in every direction, and beyond that were the clusters of individual cabins interlaced by walks, small parks, an occasional pool, and a few little groves of trees "for privacy and the feeling of oneness with Nature," the brochure said. But the brochure didn't even do justice to the place. Nothing could have except the popping eyes of the thousand of tourists who saw the Great Universal every month. And they were usually in no condition to sit down and talk calmly about it.

Around the entire collection of buildings rose a wall that fitted the architectural style of the place perfectly. A Hollywood writer out for a three-day bender had called it "Futuristic Mediaeval," since it seemed to be a set-designer's notion of Camelot combined with a Twenty-fifth Century city as imagined by Frank R. Paul. It had Egyptian designs on it, but no one knew exactly why. On the other hand, of course, there was no real reason why not.

That was not the only decoration. Emblazoned on the Tower, in huge letters of evershifting color, was a glowing sign larger than the eye could believe. The sign proclaimed through daylight and the darkest night: Great Universal Hotel. Malone had no doubts about it.

There was a running argument as to whether or not the Great Universal was actually on the Strip. Certainly the original extent of the Strip didn't include it. But the Strip itself had been spreading Westward at a slow but steady pace for two decades, and the only imaginable stopping-point was the California border.

Malone had taken a taxi from the airfield, and had supplied himself with silver dollars there. He gave the cabbie one of them and added another when the man's expression showed real pain. Still unhappy but looking a little less like a figure

out of the Great Depression, the cabbie gunned his machine away, leaving Malone standing in the carport surrounded by suitcases and bags of all sizes and weights.

A robot redcap came gliding along. Inevitably, it was gilded, and looked absolutely brand new. Behind it, a chunky little man with bright eyes waved at Malone. "Reserved here?" he said.

"That's right," Malone said. "The name is Malone."

The redcap's escort shrugged. "I don't care if the name is Jack the Ripper," he said. "Just reservations, that's all I care."

Malone watched the luggage being stowed away, and followed after the redcap and its escort with mixed feelings. Las Vegas glittered like mad, but the two inhabitants he had met so far seemed a little dim. However, he told himself, better things might turn up.

Better things did, almost immediately. In the great lobby of the Tower, guests were lounging about in little groups. Many of the guests were dressed in tuxedos, others in sport shirts and slacks. Quite a number were wearing dresses, skirt-and-blouse combinations or evening gowns, and Malone paid most of his attention to these.

New York, Washington and even Chicago had nothing to match them, he thought dazedly. They were magnificent, and almost frightening in their absolute beauty. Malone however, was not easily daunted. He followed a snappily-dressed bellman to the registration desk while his robot purred gently after him. First things first, he thought—but making friends with the other guests definitely came up number two. Or three, anyhow, he amended sadly.

He signed his own name to the register, but didn't add: "Federal Bureau of Investigation" after it. After all, he thought, he was there unofficially. And even though gambling was perfectly legal in Nevada, the thought of the FBI still made many of the club owners just the least little bit nervous. Instead, Malone gave a Chicago firm as his business address—one which the FBI used as a cover for just such purposes.

The clerk looked at him politely and blankly. "A room in the Tower, sir?" he said.

Malone shook his head. "Ground floor," he said. "But not too far from the Tower. I get airsick easily."

The clerk gave Malone a large laugh, which made him uncomfortable and a little angry. The joke hadn't been all that good, he thought. If he'd ordered a top-price room he could understand the hospitality, but the most expensive rooms were in the Tower, with the outside cabins running a close second. The other rooms dropped in price as they approached the periphery of the main building.

"A humorist, sir?" the clerk said.

"Not at all," Malone said pleasantly, wishing he'd signed with his full occupation and address. "I'm a gravedigger. Business has been very good this year."

The clerk, apparently undecided as to whether or not to offer congratulations, settled for consulting his registry and then stabbing at a button on a huge and complex board at his right. A key slid out of a slot and the clerk handed it to Malone with a rather strained smile. "10-Q," he said.

"You're very welcome," Malone said in his most unctuous tones. He took the key.

The clerk blinked. "The bellman will take you to your rooms, sir," he said in a good imitation of his original voice. "There are maps of the building at intervals along the halls, and if you find that you have become lost you have only to ask one of the hall guides to show you the proper directions."

"My, my," Malone said.

The clerk cleared his throat. "If you wish to use one of the cars," he went on in a slightly more unsteady voice, "simply insert your key in the slot beneath one of the wall maps, and a car will be at your service."

Malone shook his head and gave a deep sigh. "What," he said, "will they think of next?"

Satisfied with that for an exit line, he turned and found that the bellman had already taken his luggage from the robot redcap and put it aboard a small electric car. Malone got in beside him and the bellman started the vehicle down the hallway. It rolled along on soft, silent tires. It, too, was gilded. It didn't move very fast, Malone thought, but it certainly beat walking.

Each hallway which radiated out from the central section beneath the Tower was built like a small-edition city street. The little cars scooted up and down the two center lanes while pedestrians, poor benighted souls, kept to the side walkways. Every so often Malone saw one, walking along the raised walkway and holding the rail along the outside that was meant to keep guests of every stage of drunkenness from falling into the road. At the intersections, small, Japanese-style bridges crossed over the roadway. On these, Malone saw uniformed men standing motionless, one to a bridge. They all looked identical, and each one had a small gold stripe sewn to the chest of the red uniform. Malone read the letters on the stripe as they passed the third man. It said: Guide.

"Now, you live in Q-wing, sir," the bellman was saying in a nasal, but rather pleasant voice as Malone looked away. "You're not far from the Tower Lobby, so you won't have a lot to remember. It's not like living along, say, the D-E Passageway out near 20 or 23."

"I'm sure it isn't," Malone said politely.

"No," the bellman said, "you got it simple. This here is Q-Yellow—see the yellow stripe on the wall?"

Malone looked. There was a yellow stripe on the wall. "I see it," he said.

"So all you got to do," the bellman said, "is follow Q-Yellow to the Tower Lobby." He acted as if he had demonstrated a Euclidean proposition flawlessly. "Got it?" he asked.

"Very simple," Malone said.

"O.K.," the bellman said. "Now, the gaming rooms—"

Malone listened with about a fifth of an ear while the bellman went on spinning out incredibly complex directions for getting around in the quasi-city that was the Great Universal. At one point he thought he caught the man saying that an elephant ramp took guests past the resplendent glass rest rooms to the roots of the roulette wheel, but that didn't sound even remotely plausible when he considered it. At last the bellman announced:

"Here we are, sir. Right to your door. A courtesy of the friendly Great Universal Hotel."

He pulled over to the side, pushed a button on the sidewalk, and the little car's body elevated itself on hydraulic pistons until it was even with the elevated sidewalk. The bellman pushed a stud on the walkway rail and a gate swung open. Malone stepped out and waited while luggage was unloaded. The courtesy of the Great Universal Hotel was not free, of course; Malone got rid of some more silver dollars. He fished in his pockets, found one lone crumpled ten-dollar bill and arranged it neatly and visibly in his right hand.

"I notice you've got a lot of guides in the halls," he said as the bellman eyed the ten-spot. "Do that many people get lost in here?"

"Well, not really, sir," the bellman said. "Not really. That's for the—what they call the protection of our guests. A courtesy."

"Protection?" Malone said. He had noticed, he recalled, odd bulges beneath the left armpits of the guides. "Protection from what?" he asked, keeping a firm, loving grip on the bill. "There are a lot more guides than you'd expect, aren't there?"

The bellman shifted uneasily from foot to foot. "Well, sir," he said at last in an uneasy manner, "I guess it's because of the politics around here. I mean, it's sort of confused."

"Confused how?" Malone said, waving the bill ever so slightly.

The bellman appeared to be hypnotized by its green color. "It's the governor shooting himself," he said at last. "And the Legislature wants to impeach the Lieutenant-governor, and the City Council of Las Vegas is having trouble with the Mayor, and the County Sheriff is having a feud with the State Police, and—Sir, it's all sort of confused right now. But it isn't serious." He grinned hopefully.

Malone sighed and let go of the ten. It stayed fluttering in the air for perhaps a

tenth of a second, and disappeared. "I'm sure it isn't," Malone said. "Just forget I asked you."

The bellman's hand went to his pocket and came out again empty. "Asked me, sir?" he said. "Asked me what?"

The next fifteen minutes were busy ones. Malone made himself quickly at home, keeping his eyes open for hidden TV cameras or other forms of bugging. Satisfied at last that he was entirely alone, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes and teleported himself to Yucca Flats.

This time, he didn't land in Dr. O'Connor's office. Instead, he opened his eyes in the hallway in the nearby building that housed the psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists who were working with the telepaths Malone and the FBI had unearthed two years before.

Apparently, telepathy was turning out to be more a curse than a blessing. Of the seven known telepaths in the world, only Her Majesty retained anything like the degree of sanity necessary for communication. The psych men who were working with the other six had been trying to establish some kind of rapport, but their efforts so far had been as fruitless as a petrified tree.

Malone went down the hallway until he came to a door near the end. He looked at the sign painted on the opaqued glass for a second:

ALAN MARSHALL, M.D.

CHIEF OF STAFF

PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

With a slight sigh, he pushed open the door and went in.

Dr. Marshall was a tall, balding man with a light-brown brush mustache and a pleasant smile. He wore thick glasses but he didn't look at all scholarly; instead, he looked rather like Alec Guinness made up for a role as a Naval lieutenant. He rose as Malone entered, and stretched a hand across the desk. "Glad to see you, Sir Kenneth," he said. "Very glad."

Malone shook hands and raised his eyebrows. "Sir Kenneth?" he said.

Dr. Marshall shrugged slightly. "She prefers it," he said. "And since there's no telling whose mind she might look into—" He smiled. "After all," he finished, "why not?"

"Tell me, doctor," Malone said. "Don't you ever get uneasy about the fact that Her Majesty can look into your mind? I mean, it has disturbed some people."

"Not at all," Marshall said. "Not in the least. After all, Sir Kenneth, it's all a matter of adjustment. Simple adjustment and no more." He paused, then added: "Like sex."

"Sex?" Malone said in a voice he hoped was calm.

"Cultural mores," Marshall said. "That sort of thing. Nothing, really." He sat

down. "Make yourself comfortable," he told Malone. "As a matter of fact, the delusion Her Majesty suffers from has its compensations for the psychiatrist. Where else could I be appointed Royal Psychiatrist, Advisor to the Crown, and Earl Marshal?"

Malone looked around, found a comfortable chair and dropped into it. "I suppose so," he said. "It must be sort of fun, in a way."

"Oh, it is," Marshall said. "Of course, it can get to be specifically troublesome; all cases can. I remember a girl who'd managed to get herself married to the wrong man—she was trying to escape her mother, or some such thing. And she'd moved into this apartment where her next-door neighbor, a nice woman really, had rather strange sexual tendencies. Well, what with those problems, and the husband himself—a rather ill-tempered brute, but a nice fellow basically—and her eventually meeting Mr. Right, which was inevitable—"

"I'm sure it was very troublesome," Malone put in.

"Extremely," Marshall said. "Worked out in the end, though. Ah ... most of them do seem to, when we're lucky. When things break right."

"And when they don't?" Malone said.

Marshall shook his head slowly and rubbed at his forehead with two fingers. "We do what we can," he said. "It's an infant science. I remember one rather unhappy case—started at a summer theatre, but the complications didn't stop there. As I recall, there were something like seven women and three men involved deeply before it began to straighten itself out. My patient was a young boy. Ah ... he had actually precipitated the situation, or was convinced that he had. All basically nice people, by the way. All of them. But the kind of thing they managed to get mixed up in—"

"I'm sure it was interesting," Malone said. "But—"

"Oh, they're all interesting," Marshall said. "But for sheer complexity ... well, this is an unusual sort of case, the one I'm thinking about now. I remember it began with a girl named Ned—"

"Dr. Marshall," Malone said desperately, "I'd like to hear about a girl named Ned. I really would. It doesn't even sound probable."

"Ah?" Dr. Marshall said. "I'd like to tell you—"

"Unfortunately," Malone went on doggedly, "there is some business I've got to talk over."

Dr. Marshall's disappointment was evident for less than a second. "Yes, Sir Kenneth?" he said.

Malone took a deep breath. "It's about Her Majesty's mental state," he said. "I understand that a lot of it is complicated, and I probably wouldn't understand it. But can you give me as much as you think I can digest?"

Marshall nodded slowly. "Ah ... you must understand that psychiatrists differ," he said. "We appear to run in schools—like fish, which is neither here nor there. But what I tell you might not be in accord with a psychiatrist from another school, Sir Kenneth."

"O.K.," Malone said. "Shoot."

"An extremely interesting slang word, by the way," Marshall said. "'Shoot.' Superficially an invitation to violence. I wonder—" A glance from Malone was sufficient. "Getting back to the track, however," he went on, "I should begin by saying that Her Majesty appears to have suffered a shock of traumatic proportions early in life. That might be the telepathic faculty itself coming to the fore—or, rather, the realization that others did not share her faculty. That she was, in fact, in communication with a world which could never reach her on her own deepest and most important level." He paused. "Are you following me so far?" he asked.

"Gamely," Malone admitted. "In other words, when she couldn't communicate, she went into this traumatic shock."

"Nor exactly," Marshall said. "We must understand what communication is. Basically, Sir Kenneth, we can understand it as a substitute for sexual activity. That is, in its deepest sense. It is this attack on the deepest levels of the psychic organism that results in the trauma; and has results of its own, by the way, which succeed in stabilizing the traumatic shock on several levels."

Malone blinked. "That last part began to get me a little," he said. "Can we go over it again, just the tune this time and leave out the harmony?"

Marshall smiled. "Certainly," he said. "Remember that Her Majesty has been locked up in institutions since early adolescence. Because of this—a direct result of the original psychosis—she has been deprived, not only of the communication which serves as a sublimation for sexual activity, but, in fact, any normal sexual activity. Her identification of herself with the Virgin Queen is far from accidental, Sir Kenneth."

The idea that conservation was sex was a new and somewhat frightening one to Malone, but he stuck to it grimly. "No sex," Malone said. "That's the basic trouble."

Marshall nodded. "It always is," he said. "In one form or another, Sir Kenneth; it is at the root of such problems at all times. But in Her Majesty's case the psychosis has become stabilized; she is the Virgin Queen, and therefore her failure to become part of the normal sexual activity of her group has a reason. It is accepted on that basis by her own psyche."

"I see," Malone said. "Or, anyhow, I think I do. But how about changes? Could she get worse or better? Could she start lying to people—for the fun of it, or for reasons of her own?"

"Changes in her psychic state don't seem very probable," Marshall said. "In

theory, of course, anything is possible; but in fact, I have observed and worked with Her Majesty and no such change has occurred. You may take that as definite.''

''And the lying?'' Malone said.

Marshall frowned slightly. ''I've just explained,'' he said, ''that Her Majesty has been blocked in the direction of communication—that is, in the direction of one of her most important sexual sublimations. Such communication as she can have, therefore, is to be highly treasured by her; it provides the nearest thing to sex that she may have. As the Virgin Queen, she may still certainly converse in any way possible. She would not injure that valuable possession and right by falsifying it. It's quite impossible, Sir Kenneth. Quite impossible.''

This did not make Malone feel any better. It removed one of the two possibilities—but it left him with no vacation, and the most complicated case he had ever dreamed of sitting squarely in his lap and making rude faces at him.

He had to solve the case—and he had nobody but himself to depend on.

''You're sure?'' he said.

''Perfectly sure, Sir Kenneth,'' Marshall said.

Malone sighed. ''Well, then,'' he said, ''can I see Her Majesty?'' He knew perfectly well that he didn't have to ask Marshall's permission—or anybody else's. But it seemed more polite, somehow.

''She's receiving Dr. Sheldon Lord in audience just at the moment,'' Marshall said. ''I don't see why you shouldn't go on to the Throne Room, though. He's giving her some psychological tests, but they ought to be finished in a minute or two.''

''Fine,'' Malone said. ''How about court dress? Got anything here that might fit me?''

Marshall nodded. ''We've got a pretty complete line of court costume now,'' he said. ''I should say it was the most complete in existence—except possibly for the TV historical companies. Down the hall, three doors farther on, you'll find the dressing room.''

Malone thanked Dr. Marshall and went out slowly. He didn't really mind the court dress or the Elizabethan etiquette Her Majesty liked to preserve; as a matter of fact, he was rather fond of it. There had been some complaints about expense when the Throne Room and the costume arrangement were first set up, but the FBI and the Government had finally decided that it was better and easier to humor Her Majesty.

Malone spent ten minutes dressing himself magnificently in hose and doublet, slash-sleeved, ermine-trimmed coat, lace collar, and plumed hat. By the time he presented himself at the door to the Throne Room he felt almost cheerful. It had

been a long time since he had entered the world of Elizabethan knighthood over which Her Majesty held sway, and it always made him feel taller and more sure of himself. He bowed to a chunkily-built man of medium height in a stiffly brocaded jacket, carrying a small leather briefcase. The man had a whaler's beard of blond-red hair that looked slightly out of period, but the costume managed to overpower it. "Dr. Lord?" Malone said.

The bearded man peered at him. "Ah, Sir Kenneth," he said. "Yes, yes. Just been giving Her Majesty a few tests. Normal weekly check, you know."

"I know," Malone said. "Any change?"

"Change?" Lord said. "In Her Majesty? Sir Kenneth, you might as well expect the very rocks to change. Her Majesty remains Her Majesty—and will, in all probability, throughout the foreseeable future."

"The same as ever?" Malone asked hopefully.

"Exactly," Lord said. "But—if you do want background on the case—I'm flying back to New York tonight. Look me up there, if you have a chance. I'm afraid there's little information I can give you, but it's always a pleasure to talk with you."

"Thanks," Malone said dully.

"Barrow Street," Lord said with a cheery wave of the briefcase. "Number 69." He was gone. The Security Officer at the door, a young man in the uniform of a page, opened it and peered out at Malone. The FBI Agent nodded to him and the Security Officer announced in a firm, loud voice: "Sir Kenneth Malone, of Her Majesty's Own FBI!"

The Throne Room was magnificent. The whole place had been done in plastic and synthetic fibers to look like something out of the Sixteenth Century. It was as garish, and as perfect, as a Hollywood movie set—which wasn't surprising, since two stage designers had been hired away from color-TV spectaculars to set it up. At the far end of the room, past the rich hangings and the flaming chandeliers, was a great golden throne, and on it Her Majesty was seated.

Lady Barbara Wilson, Her Majesty's personal nurse, was sitting on a camp-chair arrangement nearby. She smiled slowly at Malone as he went by, and Malone returned the smile with a good deal of interest. He strode firmly down the long crimson carpet that stretched from the doorway to the throne. At the steps leading up toward the dais that held the Throne, his free hand went up and swept off the plumed hat. He sank to one knee.

"Your Majesty," he said gravely.

The queen looked down on him. "Rise, Sir Kenneth," she said in a tone of surprise. "We welcome your presence."

Malone got up off his knee and stood, his hat in his hand.

"What is your business with us?" Her Majesty asked.

Malone looked her full in the face for the first time. He realized that her expression was rather puzzled and worried. She looked even more confused than she had the last time he'd seen her.

He took a deep breath, wished for a cigar and plunged blindly ahead into the toils of court etiquette.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I know full well that you are aware of the thoughts that I have had concerning the case we have been working on. I beg Your Majesty's pardon for having doubted Your Majesty's Royal Word. Since my first doubts, of which I am sore ashamed, I have been informed by Our Majesty's Royal Psychiatrist that my doubts were ill-founded, and I wish to convey my deepest apologies. Now, having been fully convinced of the truth of Your Majesty's statements, I have a theory I would discuss with you, the particulars of which you can doubtless see in my mind."

He paused. Her Majesty was staring at him, her face pale.

"Sir Kenneth," she said in a strained voice, "we appreciate your attitude. However—" She paused for a moment, and then continued. "However, Sir Kenneth, it is our painful duty to inform you—"

She stopped again. And when she managed to speak, she had dropped all pretense of Court Etiquette.

"Sir Kenneth, I've been so worried! I was afraid you were dead!"

Malone blinked. "Dead?" he asked.

"For the past twenty-four hours," Her Majesty said in a frightened voice, "I've been unable to contact your mind. And right now, as you stand there, I can't read anything!

"It's as though you weren't thinking at all!"

**IX**

Malone stared at Her Majesty for what seemed like a long time. "Not thinking at all?" he said at last, weakly. "But I am thinking. At least, I think I am." He suddenly felt as if he had gone René Descartes one better. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

Her Majesty regarded Malone for an interminable, silent second. Then she turned to Lady Barbara. "My dear," she said, "I would like to speak to Sir Kenneth alone. We will go to my chambers."

Malone, feeling as though his brain had suddenly turned to quince jelly, followed the two women out of a small door at the rear of the Throne Room, and into Her Majesty's private apartments. Lady Barbara left them alone with some reluctance, but she'd evidently been getting used to following her patient's orders. Which, Malone thought with admiration, must take a lot of effort for a nurse.

The door closed and he was alone with the Queen. Malone opened his mouth

to speak, but Her Majesty raised a monitory hand. "Please, Sir Kenneth," she said. "Just a moment. Don't say anything for a little bit."

Malone shut his mouth. When the minute was up, Her Majesty began to nod her head, very slowly. Her voice, when she spoke, was low and calm.

"It's as though you were almost invisible," she said. "I can see you with my eyes, of course, but mentally you are almost completely indetectable. Knowing you as well as I do, and being this close to you, it is just possible for me to detect very faint traces of activity."

"Now, wait a minute," Malone said. "I am thinking. I know I am. Maybe it's not me. Your telepathy might be fading out temporarily, or something like that. It's possible, isn't it?" He was reasonably sure it wasn't, but it was a last try at making sense. Her Majesty shook her head.

"I can still receive Sir Thomas, for instance, quite clearly," she said. She seemed a little miffed, but the irritation was overpowered by her worry. "I think, Sir Kenneth, that you just don't know your own power, that's all. I don't know how, but you've managed somehow to smother telepathic communication almost completely."

"But not quite?" Malone said. Apparently, he was thinking, but very weakly. Like a small child, he told himself dismally. Like a small Elizabethan child.

Her Majesty's face took on a look of faraway concentration. "It's like looking at a very dim light," she said, "a light just at the threshold of perception. You might say that you've got to look at such a light sideways. If you look directly at it, you can't see it. And, of course, you can't see it at all if you're a long way off." She blinked. "It's not exactly like that, you understand," she finished. "But in some ways—"

"I get the idea," Malone said. "Or I think I do. But what's causing it? Sunspots? Little green men?"

"Not so little," Her Majesty said with some return of her old humor, "and not green, either. As a matter of fact, you are, Sir Kenneth."

Malone opened his mouth, shut it again and finally managed to say: "Me?" in a batlike squeal of surprise.

"I don't know how, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty went on, "but you are. It's ... rather frightening to me, as a matter of fact; I've never seen such a thing before. I've never even considered it before."

"You?" Malone said. "How about me?" It was like suddenly discovering that you'd been lifting two-hundred-pound barbells and not knowing it. "How could I be doing anything like that without knowing anything about it?"

Her Majesty shook her head. "I haven't the faintest idea," she said.

But Malone, very suddenly, did. He remembered deciding to keep a close

check on his mental processes to make sure those bursts of energy didn't do anything to him. Subconsciously, he knew, he was still keeping that watch.

And maybe the watch itself caused the complete blanking of his telepathic faculties. It was worth a test, at least, he decided. And it was an easy test to make.

"Listen," he said. He told himself that he would now allow communication between himself and Her Majesty—and only between those two. Maybe it wasn't possible to let down the barrier in a selective way, but he gave it all he had. A long second passed.

"My goodness!" Her Majesty said in pleased surprise. "There you are again!"

"You can read me?" Malone asked.

"Why ... yes," Her Majesty said. "And I can see just what you're thinking. I'm afraid, Sir Kenneth, that I don't know whether it's selective or not. But ... oh. Just a minute. You go right on thinking, now, just the way you are." Her Majesty's eyes unfocused slightly and a long time passed, while Malone tried to keep on thinking. But it was difficult, he told himself, to think about things without having any things to think about. He felt his mind begin to spin gently with the rhythm of the last sentence, and he considered slowly the possibility of thinking about things when there weren't any things thinking about you. That seemed to make as much sense as anything else, and he was turning it over and over in his mind when a voice broke in.

"I was contacting Willie," Her Majesty said.

"Ah," Malone said. "Willie. Of course. Very fine for contacting."

Her Majesty frowned. "You remember Willie, don't you?" she said. "Willie Logan—who used to be a spy for the Russians, just because he didn't know any better, poor boy?"

"Oh," Malone said. "Logan." He remembered the catatonic youngster who had used his telepathic powers against the United States until Her Majesty, the FBI, and Kenneth J. Malone had managed to put matters right. That had been the first time he'd met Her Majesty; it seemed like fifty years before.

"Well," Her Majesty said, "Willie and I had a little argument just now. And I think you'll be interested in it."

"I'm fascinated," Malone said.

"Was he thinking about things or were things thinking about him?"

"Really, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said, "you do think about the silliest notions when you don't watch yourself."

Malone blushed slightly. "Anyhow," he said after a pause, "what was the argument about?"

"Willie says you aren't here," Her Majesty said. "He can't detect you at all. Even when I let him take a peek at you through my own mind—making myself into

sort of a relay station, so to speak—Willie wouldn't believe it. He said I was hallucinating."

"Hallucinating me?" Malone said. "I think I'm flattered. Not many people would bother."

"Don't underestimate yourself, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said, rather severely. "But you do see what this little argument means, don't you? I think you may assume that your telepathic contact is quite selective. If Willie can't read you, Sir Kenneth, believe me, nobody at all can ... unless you let them."

How he had developed this mental shield, he couldn't imagine, unless his subconscious had done it for him. Good old subconscious, he thought, always looking out for a person's welfare, preparing little surprises and things. Though he hoped vaguely that the next surprise, if there were a next one, would sneak up a little more gently. Being told flatly that your mind was not in operation was not a very good way to start an investigation.

Then he thought of something else. "Do you think this ... barrier of mine will keep out those little bursts of mental energy?" he said.

Her Majesty looked judicious. "I really do," she said. "It does appear quite impenetrable, Sir Kenneth. I can't understand how you're doing it. Or why, for that matter."

"Well—" Malone began.

Her Majesty raised a hand. "No," she said. "I'd rather not know, if you please." Her voice was stern, but just a little shaken. "The thought of blocking off thought—the only real form of communication that exists—is, frankly, quite horrible to me. I would rather be blinded, Sir Kenneth. I truly would."

Malone thought of Dr. Marshall and blushed. Her Majesty peered at him narrowly, and then smiled.

"You've been talking to my Royal Psychiatrist again, haven't you?" she said. Malone nodded. "Frankly, Sir Kenneth," she went on, "I think people pay too much attention to that sort of thing nowadays."

The subject, Malone recognized, was firmly closed. He cleared his throat and started up another topic. "Let's talk about these energy bursts," he said. "Do you still pick them up occasionally?"

"Oh, my, yes," Her Majesty said. "And it's not only me. Willie has been picking them up too. We've had some long talks about it, Willie and I. It's frightening, in a way, but you must admit that it's very interesting."

"Fascinating," Malone muttered. "Tell me, have you figured out what they might be, yet?"

Her Majesty shook her head. "All we know is that they do seem to occur just before a person intends to make a decision. The burst somehow appears to influ-

ence the decision. But we don't know how, and we don't know where they come from, or what causes them. Or even why."

"In other words," Malone said, "we know absolutely nothing new."

"I'm afraid not, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said. "But Willie and I do intend to keep working on it. It is important, isn't it?"

"Important," Malone said, "is not the word." He paused. "And now, if your Majesty will excuse me," he said, "I'll have to go. I have work to do, and your information has been most helpful."

"You may go, Sir Kenneth," Her Majesty said, returning with what appeared to be real pleasure to the etiquette of the Elizabethan Court. "We are grateful that you have done so much, and continue to do so much, to defend the peace of Our Realm."

"I pledge myself to continue in those efforts which please Your Majesty," Malone said, and started back for the costume room. Once he'd changed into his regular clothing again he snapped himself back to the room he had rented in the Great Universal. He had a great deal of thinking to do, he told himself, and not much time to do it in.

However, he was alone. That meant he could light up a cigar—something which, as an FBI Agent, he didn't feel he should do in public. Cigars just weren't right for FBI Agents, though they were all right for ordinary detectives like Malone's father. As a matter of fact, he considered briefly hunting up a vest, putting it on and letting the cigar ash dribble over it. His father seemed to have gotten a lot of good ideas that way. But, in the end, he rejected the notion as being too complicated, and merely sat back in a chair, with an ashtray conveniently on a table by his side, and smoked and thought.

Now, he knew with reasonable certainty that Andrew J. Burris was wrong and that he, Malone, was right. The source of all the confusion in the country was due to psionics, not to psychodrugs and Walt Disney spies.

His first idea was to rush back and tell Burris. However, this looked like a useless move, and every second he thought about it made it seem more useless. He simply didn't have enough new evidence to convince Burris of anything whatever; psychiatric evidence was fine to back up something else, but on its own it was still too shaky to be accepted by the courts, in most cases. And Burris thought even more strictly than the courts in such matters.

Not only that, Malone realized with alarm, but even if he did manage somehow to convince Burris there was very little chance that Burris would stay convinced. If his mind could be changed by a burst of wild mental power—and why not? Malone reflected—then he could be unconvinced as often as necessary. He could be spun round and round like a top and never end up facing the way Malone needed him to face.

That left the burden of solving the problem squatting like a hunchback's hunch squarely on Malone's shoulders. He thought he could bear the weight for a while, if he could only think of some way of dislodging it. But the idea of its continuing to squat there forever was horribly unnerving. "Quasimodo Malone," he muttered, and uttered a brief prayer of thanks that his father had been spared a classical education. "Ken" wasn't so bad. "Quasi" would have been awful.

He couldn't think of any way to get a fingerhold on the thing that weighed him down. Slowly, he went over it in his mind.

Situation: an unidentifiable something is attacking the United States with an untraceable something else from a completely unknown source.

Problem: how do you go about latching on to anything as downright nonexistent as all that?

Even the best detective, Malone told himself irritably, needed clues of some kind. And this thing, whatever it was, was not playing fair. It didn't go around leaving bloody fingerprints or lipsticked cigarette butts or packets of paper matches with Ciro's, Hollywood, written on them. It didn't even have an alibi for anything that could be cracked, or leave tire marks or footprints behind that could be photographed. Hell, Malone thought disgustedly, it wasn't that the trail was cold. It just wasn't.

Of course, there were ways to get clues, he reflected. He thought of his father. His father would have gone to the scene of the crime, or questioned some of the witnesses. But the scene of the crime was anywhere and everywhere, and most of the witnesses didn't know they were witnessing anything. Except for Her Majesty, of course—but he'd already questioned her, and there hadn't been any clues he could recall in that conversation.

Malone stubbed out his cigar, lit another one absent-mindedly, and rescued his tie, which was working its slow way around to the side of his collar. There were, he remembered, three classic divisions of any crime: method, motive and opportunity. Maybe thinking about those would lead somewhere.

As an afterthought, he got up, found a pencil and paper with the hotel's name stamped on them in gold and came back to the chair. Clearing the ashtray aside, he put the paper on the table and divided the paper into three vertical columns with the pencil. He headed the first one Method, the second Motive and the third Opportunity.

He stared at the paper for a while, and decided with some trepidation to take the columns one by one. Under Method, he put down: "Little bursts. Who knows cause?" Some more thought gave him another item, and he set it down under the first one: "Psionic. Look for psionic people?"

That apparently was all there was to the first column. After a while he moved to number two, Motive. "Confuse things," he wrote with scarcely a second's re-

flection. But that didn't seem like enough. A few minutes more gave him several other items, written down one under the other. "Disrupt entire US. Set US up for invasion? Martians? Russians? CK: Is Russia having trble?" That seemed to exhaust the subject and with some relief he went on. But the title of the next column nearly stopped him completely.

Opportunity. There wasn't anything he could put down under that one, Malone told himself, until he knew a great deal more about method. As things stood at present, the best entry under Opportunity was a large, tastefully done question mark. He made one, and then sat back to look at the entire list and see what help it gave him:

Method Little bursts. Who knows cause? Psionic. Look for psionic people? Motive Confuse things. Disrupt entire US. Set US up for invasion? Martians? Russians? CK: Is Russia having trble? Opportunity?

Somehow, it didn't seem to be much help, when he thought about it. It had a lot of information on it, but none of the information seemed to lead anywhere. It did seem to be established that the purpose was to confuse or disrupt the United States, but this didn't seem to point to anybody except a Russian, an alien or a cosmic practical joker. Malone could see no immediate way of deciding among the trio. However, he told himself, there are other ways to start investigating a crime. There must be.

Psychological methods, for instance. People had little gray cells, he remembered from his childhood reading. Some of the more brainy fictional detectives never stooped to anything so low as an actual physical clue. They concentrated solely on finding a pattern in the crimes that indicated, infallibly, the psychology of the individual. Once his psychology had been identified, it was only a short step to actually catching him and putting him in jail until his psychology changed for the better. Or, of course, until it disappeared entirely and was buried, along with the rest of him, in a small wood box.

That wasn't Malone's affair. All he had to do was take the first few steps and actually find the man. And perhaps psychology and pattern was the place to start. Anyhow, he reflected, he didn't have any other method that looked even remotely likely to lead to anything except brain-fag, disappointment, and catalepsy.

But he didn't have enough cases to find a pattern. There must, he thought, be a way to get some more. After a few seconds he thought of it.

At first he thought of asking Room Service for all the local and out-of-state papers, but that, he quickly saw, was a little unwise. People didn't come to Las Vegas to catch up on the news; they came to get away from it. A man might read Las Vegas papers, and possibly even his home town's paper if he couldn't break himself of the pernicious habit. But nobody on vacation would start reading papers from everywhere.

There was no sense in causing suspicion, Malone told himself. Instead, he reached for the phone and called the desk.

"Great Universal, good afternoon," a pleasant voice said in his ear.

Malone blinked. "What time is it?" he said.

"A few minutes before six," the voice said. "In the evening, sir."

"Oh," Malone said. It was later than he'd thought; the list had taken some time. "This is Kenneth J. Malone," he went on, "in Room—" He tried to remember the number of his room and failed. It seemed like four or five days since he'd entered it. "Well, wherever I am," he said at last, "send up some kind of a car for me and have a taxi waiting outside."

The voice sounded unperturbed. "Right away, sir," it said. "Will there be anything else?"

"I guess not," Malone said. "Not now, anyhow." He hung up and stubbed out the latest in his series of cigars.

The hallway car arrived in a few minutes. It was manned by a muscular little man with beady eyes and thinning black hair. "You Malone?" he said when the FBI Agent opened the door.

"Kenneth J.," Malone said. "I called for a car."

"Right outside, Chief," the little man said in a gravelly voice. "Just hop in and off we go into the wild blue yonder. Right?"

"I guess so," Malone said helplessly. He followed the man outside, locked his door and climbed into a duplicate of the little car that had taken him to his room in the first place.

"Step right in, Chief," the little man said. "We're off."

Malone, overcoming an immediate distaste for the chummy little fellow, climbed in and the car retreated down to the road. It started off smoothly and they went back toward the lobby. The little man chatted incessantly and Malone tried not to listen. But there was nothing else to do except watch the gun-toting "guides" as the car passed them, and the sight was making him nervous.

"You want anything—special," the driver said, giving Malone a blow in the ribs that was apparently meant to be subtle, "you just ask for Murray. Got it?"

"I've got it," Malone said wearily.

"You just pick up the little phone and you ask for Murray," the driver said. "Maybe you want something a little out of the ordinary—get what I mean?" Malone moved aside, but not fast enough, and Murray's stone elbow caught him again. "Something special, extra-nice. For my friends, pal. You want to be a friend of mine?"

Assurances that friendship with Murray was Malone's dearest ambition in life managed to fend off further blows until the car pulled to a stop in the lobby. "Cab's

outside, Mr. Malone,'' Murray said. ''You remember me—hey?''

''I will never, never forget you,'' Malone said fervently, and got out in a hurry. He found the cab and the driver, a heavy-set man with a face that looked as if, somewhere along the line, it had run into a Waring Blendor and barely escaped, swiveled around to look at him as he got in.

''Where to, Mac?'' he asked sourly.

Malone shrugged. ''Center of town,'' he said. ''A nice big newsstand.''

The cabbie blinked. ''A what?'' he said.

''Newsstand,'' Malone said pleasantly. ''All right with you?''

''Everybody's a little crazy, I guess,'' the cabbie said. ''But why do I always get the real nuts?'' He started the cab with a savage jerk and Malone was carried along the road at dizzying speed. They managed to make ten blocks before the cab squealed to a stop. Malone peered out and saw a nice selection of sawhorses piled up in the road, guarded by two men with guns. The men were dressed in police uniforms and the cabby, staring at them, uttered one brief and impolite word.

''What's going on?'' Malone said.

''Roadblock,'' the cabbie said. ''Thing's going to stay here until Hell freezes over. Not that they need it. Hell, I passed it on the way in but I figured they'd take it down pretty quick.''

''Roadblock?'' Malone said. ''What for?''

The cabbie shrugged eloquently. ''Who knows?'' he said. ''You ask questions, you might get answers you don't like. I don't ask questions, I live longer.''

''But—''

The cops, meanwhile, had advanced toward the car. One of them looked in. ''Who's the passenger?'' he said.

The cabbie swore again. ''You want me to take loyalty oaths from people?'' he said. ''You want to ruin my business? I got a passenger, how do I know who he is? Maybe he's the Lone Ranger.''

''Don't get funny,'' the cop said. His partner had gone around to the back of the car.

''What's this, the trunk again?'' the cabbie said. ''You think maybe I'm smuggling in showgirls from the edge of town?''

''Ha, ha,'' the cop said distinctly. ''One more joke and it's thirty days, buster. Just keep cool and nothing will happen.''

''Nothing, he calls it,'' the cabbie said dismally. But he stayed silent until the second cop came back to rejoin his partner.

''Clean,'' he said.

''Here, too, I guess,'' the first cop said, and looked in again. ''You,'' he said to

Malone. "You a tourist?"

"That's right," Malone said. "Kenneth J. Malone, at the Great Universal. Arrived this afternoon. What's happening here, officer?"

"I'm asking questions," the cop said. "You're answering them. Outside of that, you don't have to know a thing." He looked very tough and official. Malone didn't say anything else.

After a few more seconds they went back to their positions and the cabbie started the car again. Ten yards past the roadblock he turned around and looked at Malone. "It's the sheriff's office every time," he said. "Now, you take a State cop, he's O.K. because what does he care? He's got other things to worry about, he don't have to bear down on hard-working cabbies."

"Sure," Malone said helpfully.

"And the city police—they're right here in the city, they're O.K. I know them, they know me, nothing goes wrong. Get what I mean?"

"The sheriff's office is the worst, though?" Malone said.

"The worst is nothing compared to those boys," the cabbie said. "Believe me, every time they can make life tough for a cabbie, they do it. It's hatred, that's what it is. They hate cabbies. That's the sheriff's office for you."

"Tough," Malone said. "But the roadblock—what was it for, anyhow?"

The cabbie looked back at the road, avoided an oncoming car with a casual sweep of the wheel, and sighed gustily. "Mister," he said, "you don't ask questions, I don't give out answers. Fair?"

There was, after all, nothing else to say. "Fair," Malone told him, and rode the rest of the way in total silence.

Buying the papers in Las Vegas took more time than Malone had bargained for. He had to hunt from store to store to get a good, representative selection, and there were crowds almost everywhere playing the omnipresent slot-machines. The whir of the machines and the low undertones and whispers of the bettors combined in the air to make what Malone considered the single most depressing sound he had ever heard. It sounded like a factory, old, broken-down and unwanted, that was geared only to the production of cigarette butts and old cellophane, ready-crumpled for throwing away. Malone pushed through the crowds as fast as possible, but nearly an hour had gone by when he had all his papers and hailed another cab to get him back to the hotel.

This time, the cabbie had a smiling, shining face. He looked like Pollyanna, after eight or ten shots at the middleweight title. Malone beamed right back at him and got in. "Great Universal," he said.

"Hey, that's a nice place," the cabbie said heartily, as they started off. "I heard there was a couple TV stars there last week and they got drunk and had a fight.

You see that?''

''Just arrived this afternoon,'' Malone said. ''Sorry.''

''Oh, don't worry,'' the cabbie assured him. ''Something's always going on at the Universal. I hear they posted a lot of guards there, just waiting for something to come up now. Something about some shooting, but I didn't get the straight story yet. That true?''

''Far as I know,'' Malone said. ''There's a lot of strange things happening lately, aren't there?''

''Lots,'' the cabbie said eagerly. He meandered slowly around a couple of bright-red convertibles. ''A guy owned the Last Stand, he killed himself with a gun today. It's in the papers. Listen, Mister, funny things happen all the time around here. I remember last week there was a lady in my cab, nice old bat, looked like she wouldn't take off an earring in public, not among strangers. You know the type. Well, sir, she asked me to take her on to the Golden Palace, and that's a fair ride. So on the way down, she—''

Fascinated as he was by the unreeling story of the shy old bat, Malone interrupted. ''I hear there's a roadblock up now, and they're searching all the cars. Know anything about that?''

The cabbie nodded violently. ''Sure, Mister,'' he said. ''Now, it's funny you should ask. I hit the block once today and I was saying to myself, I'll bet somebody's going to ask me about this. So when I was in town I talked around with Si Deeds ... you know Si? Oh, no, you just arrived today ... anyhow, I figured Si would know.''

''And did he?'' Malone said.

''Not a thing,'' the cabbie said. Malone sighed disgustedly and the cabbie went on: ''So I went over and talked to Bob Grindell. I figured, there was action, Bob would know. And guess what?''

''He didn't know either,'' Malone said tiredly.

''Bob?'' the cabbie said. ''Say, Mister, you must be new here for sure, if you say Bob wouldn't know what was going on. Why, Bob knows more about this town than guys lived in it twice as long, I'll tell you. Believe me, he knows.''

''And what did he say?'' Malone asked.

The cabbie paused. ''About what?'' he said.

''About the roadblock,'' Malone said distinctly.

''Oh,'' the cabbie said. ''That. Well, that was a funny thing and no mistake. There was this fight, see? And Shellenberger got in the middle of it, see? So when he was dead they had to set up this roadblock.''

Malone restrained himself with some difficulty. ''What fight?'' he said. ''And who's Shellenberger? And how did he get in the way?''

''Mister,'' the cabbie said, ''you must be new here.''

"A remarkable guess," Malone said.

The cabbie nodded. "Sure must be," he said. "Gus Shellenberger's lived here over ten years now. I drove him around many's the time. Remember when he used to go out to this motel out on the outskirts there; there was this doll he was interested in but it never came to much. He said she wasn't right for his career, you know how guys like that are, they got to be careful all the time. Never hit the papers or anything—I mean with the doll and all—but people get to know things. You know. So with this doll—"

"How long ago did all this happen?" Malone asked.

"The doll?" the cabbie said. "Oh, five-six years. Maybe seven. I remember it was the year I got a new cab, business was pretty good, you know. Seven, I guess. Garage made me a price, you know, I had to be an idiot to turn it down? A nice price. Well, George Lamel who owns the place, he's an old friend, you know? I did him some favors so he gives me a nice price. Well, this new cab—"

"Can we get back to the present for a little while?" Malone said. "There was this fight, and your friend Gus Shellenberger got involved in it somehow—"

"Oh, that," the cabbie said. "Oh, sure. Well, there was a kind of chase. Some sheriff's officers were looking for an escaped convict, and they were chasing him and doing some shooting. And Shellenberger, he got in the way and got shot accidentally. The criminal, he got away. But it's kind of a mess, because—"

A loud chorus of sirens effectively stopped all conversation. Two cars stamped with the insignia of the sheriff's office came into sight and streaked past, headed for Las Vegas.

"Because Shellenberger was State's attorney, after all," the cabbie said. "It's not like just anybody got killed."

"And the roadblock?" Malone said.

"For the criminal, I guess," the cabbie said.

Malone nodded heavily. The whole thing smelled rather loudly, he thought. The "accident" wasn't very plausible to start with. And a search for an escaped criminal that didn't even involve checking identification of strangers like Malone wasn't much of a search. The cops knew who they were looking for.

And Shellenberger hadn't been killed by accident.

The roadblock was down, he noticed. The sheriff's office cars had apparently carried the cheerful cops back to Las Vegas. Maybe they'd found their man, Malone thought, and maybe they just didn't care any more.

"Wouldn't a State's attorney live in Carson City?" he asked after a while.

"Not old Gus Shellenberger," the cabbie said. "Many's the time I talked with him and he said he loved this old town. Loved it. Like an old friend. Why, he used to say to me—"

At that point the Great Universal hove into view. Malone felt extraordinarily grateful to see it.

He went to his room with the bundle of papers in his hand and locked himself in. He lit a fresh cigar and started through the papers. Las Vegas was the one on top, and he gave it a quick going-over. Sure enough, the suicide of the Golden Palace owner was on page one, along with a lot of other local news.

Mayor Resigns Under Council Pressure, one headline read. On page 3 another story was headlined: County Attorney Indicted by Grand Jury in Bribery Case. And at the bottom of page 1, complete with pictures of baffled phone operators and linemen, was a double column spread: Damage to Phone Relay Station Isolates City Five Hours.

Carson City, the State Capitol, came in for lots of interesting news, too. Three headlines caught Malone's attention:

LT.-GOVERNOR MORRIS SWORN IN AS GOVERNOR TWELVE MEMBERS OF LEGISLATURE RESIGN

Ill Health Given As Reason

STATE'S ATTORNEY'S OFFICE: "NO COMMENT" ON RACKETS CONNECTION CHARGE.

The next paper was the New York Post. Malone studied the front page with interest:

MAYOR ORDERS ARREST OF POLICE COMM.

The story on page 3 had a little more detail:

MAYOR AMALFI ORDERS ARREST OF POLICE COMMISSIONER ON EVIDENCE SHOWING "COLLUSION WITH GAMBLING INTERESTS"

But Malone didn't have time to read the story. Other headlines on pages 2 and 3 attracted his startled attention:

TWELVE DIE IN BROOKLYN GANG MASSACRE

Ricardo, Numbers Head, Among Slain

"DANGEROUS DAN" SUGRUE LINKED WITH TRUCKER'S UNION

Admits Connection "Gladly"

HOUSING AUTHORITY DENIES, THEN CONFESSES GRAFT CHARGE

Malone wiped a streaming brow. Apparently all hell was busting loose. Under the Post was the San Francisco Examiner, its crowded front page filled with all sorts of strange and startling news items. Malone looked over a few at random. A wildcat waterfront strike had been called off after the resignation of the union local's president. The "Nob Hill Mob," which had grown notorious in the past few years, had been rounded up and captured in toto after what the paper described only as a "police tipoff." Two headlines caught his special attention:

BERSERK POLICE CAPTAIN KILLS TWO AIDES, SELF: CORRUPTION HINTED

The second hit closer to home:

FBI ARRESTS THREE STATE SENATORS ON INCOME TAX CHARGE

Malone felt a pang of nostalgia. Conquering it after a brief struggle, he went on to the next paper. From Los Angeles, its front page showed that Hollywood, at least, was continuing to hold its own:

LAVISH FUNERAL PLANNED FOR WONDER DOG TOMORROW

But the Washington Times-Herald brought things back to the mess Malone had expected. All sorts of things were going on:

PRESIDENT ACCEPTS RESIGNATION OF THREE CABINET MEMBERS

New Appointees Not Yet Named

PENTAGON TO INVESTIGATE QUARTER-MASTER CORPS GRAFT

Revelations Hinted In Closed Hearing Thursday

RIOT ON SENATE FLOOR QUELLED BY GUARDS

Sen. Briggs Hospitalized

GENERAL BREGER, MISSILE BASE HEAD, DIES IN TESTING ACCIDENT

Faulty Equipment Blamed

Malone put the papers down with a deep sigh. There was some kind of a pattern there, he was sure; there had to be. More was happening in the good old United States inside of twenty-four hours than ordinarily happened in a couple of months. The big trouble was that some of it was, doubtless, completely unconnected with the work of Malone's psychological individual. It was equally certain that some of it wasn't; no normal workings of chance could account for the spate of resignations, deaths, arrests of high officials, freak accidents and everything else he'd just seen.

But there was no way of telling which was which. The only one he was reasonably sure he could leave out of his calculations was Hollywood's good old Wonder Dog. And when he looked at the rest all he could see was that confusion was rampant. Which was exactly what he'd known before.

He remembered once, when he was a boy, his mother had taken him to an astronomical observatory, and he had looked at Mars through the big telescope, hoping to see the canals he'd heard so much about. Sure, enough, there had been a blurred pattern of some kind. It might have represented canals—but he'd been completely unable to trace any given line. It was like looking at a spiderweb through a sheet of frosted glass.

He needed a clearer view, and there wasn't any way to get it without finding some more information. Sooner or later, he told himself, everything would fall into one simple pattern, and he would give a cry of "Eureka!"

There was, at any rate, no need to go to the scene of the crime. He was right in the middle of it—and would have been, apparently, no matter where he'd been.

The big question was: where were all the facts he needed?

He certainly wasn't going to find them all alone in his room, he decided. Mingling with the Las Vegas crowds might give him some sort of a lead—and, besides, he had to act like a man on vacation, didn't he? Satisfied of this, Malone began to change into his dress suit. People who came to Las Vegas, he told himself while fiddling with what seemed to be a left-hand-thread cufflink of a peculiarly nasty disposition, were usually rich. Rich people would be worried about the way the good old United States was acting up, just like anybody else, but they'd have access to various sources both of information and rumor. Rumor was more valuable than might at first appear, Malone thought sententiously, sneaking up on the cufflink and fastening it securely. He finished dressing with what was almost an air of hope.

He surveyed himself in the mirror when he was done. Nobody, he told himself with some assurance, would recognize him as the FBI Agent who had come into the Golden Palace two years before, clad in Elizabethan costume and escorting a Queen who had turned out to be a phenomenal poker player. After all, Las Vegas was a town in which lots of strange things happened daily, and he was dressed differently, and he'd aged at least two years in the intervening two years.

He put in a call for a hallway car—carefully refraining from asking for Murray.

## X

"Business, Mr. Malone," the bartender said, "is shot all to hell. The whole country is shot all to hell."

"I believe it," Malone said.

"Sure," the bartender said. He finished polishing one glass and set to work on another one. "Look at the place," he went on. "Half full. You been here two weeks now, and you know how business was when you came. Now look."

It wasn't necessary, but Malone turned obediently to survey the huge gambling hall. It was roofed over by a large golden dome that seemed to make the place look even emptier than it could possibly be. There were still plenty of people around the various tables, and something approaching a big crowd clustered around the chemin de fer layout. But it was possible to breathe in the place, and even move from table to table without stepping into anybody's pocket. Las Vegas was definitely sliding downhill at the moment, Malone thought.

The glitter of polished gold and silver ornaments, the low cries of the various dealers and officials, the buzz of conversation, were all the same. But under the great dome, Malone told himself sadly, you could almost see the people leaving, one by one.

"No money around either," the bartender said. "Except maybe for a few guys like yourself. I mean, people take their chances at the wheel or the tables, but

there's no big betting going on, just nickel-dime stuff. And no big spending, either. Used to be tips in a place like this, just tips, would really mount up to something worth while. Now, nothing." He put the glass and towel down and leaned across the bar. "You know what I think, Mr. Malone?" he said.

"No," Malone said politely. "What do you think?"

The bartender looked portentous. "I think all the big-money guys have rushed off home to look after their business and like that," he said, "everything's going to hell, and what I want to know is: What's wrong with the country? You're a big businessman, Mr. Malone. You ought to have some ideas."

Malone paused and looked thoughtful. "I'll tell you what I think," he said. "I think people have decided that gambling is sinful. Maybe we all ought to go and get our souls dry-cleaned."

The bartender shook his head. "You always got a little joke, Mr. Malone," he said. "It's what I like about you. But there must be some reason for what's happening."

"There must be," Malone agreed. "But I'll be double-roasted for extra fresh flavor if I know what it is."

His vacation pay, he told himself with a feeling of downright misery, was already down the drain. He'd been dipping into personal savings to keep up his front as a big spender, but that couldn't go on forever—even though he saved money on the front by gambling very little while he tipped lavishly. And in spite of what he'd spent he was no closer to an answer than he had been when he'd started.

"Now, you take the stock market," the bartender said, picking up the glass and towel again and starting to work in a semiautomatic fashion. "It's going up and down like a regular roller coaster. I know because I got a few little things going for me there—nothing much, you understand, but I keep an eye out for developments. It doesn't make any sense, Mr. Malone. Even the financial columnists can't make sense out of it."

"Terrible," Malone said.

"And the Government's been cracking down on business everywhere it can," the bartender went on. "All kinds of violations. I got nothing against the law, you understand. But that kind of thing don't help profits any. Look at the Justice Department."

"You look at it," Malone muttered.

"No," the bartender said. "I mean it. They been arresting people all over the place for swindling on Government contracts, and falsifying tax records, and graft, and all kinds of things. Listen, every FBI man in the country must be up to his cute little derby hat in work."

"I'll bet they are," Malone said. He heaved a great sigh. Every one of them except Kenneth J. Malone was probably hopping full time in an effort to straighten out the complicated mess everything was getting into. Of course, he was working, too—but not officially. As far as the FBI knew, he was on vacation, and they were perfectly willing to let him stay there.

A nationwide emergency over two weeks old, and getting worse all the time—and Burris hadn't even so much as called Malone to talk about the weather. He'd said that Malone was one of his top operatives, but now that trouble was really piling up there wasn't a peep out of him.

The enemy, whoever they were, were doing a great job, Malone thought bitterly. Every time Burris decided he might need Malone, apparently, they pushed a little mental burst at him and turned him around again. He could just picture Burris looking blankly at an FBI roster and saying: "Malone? Who's he?"

It wasn't a nice picture. Malone took a deep swallow of his bourbon-and-water and tried forgetting about it. The bartender, called by another customer, put the glass and towel down and went to the other end of the bar. Malone finished his drink very slowly, feeling more lonely than he could ever remember being before.

At last, though, four-thirty rolled around and he got up from the plush bar stool and headed for the Universal Joint, the hotel's big show-room. It was one of the few places in the hotel that was easily reachable from the front bar on foot, and Malone walked, taking an unexpected pleasure in this novel form of locomotion. In a few minutes he was at the great curtained front doors.

He pushed them open. Later, of course, when the Universal Joint was open to the public, a man in a uniform slightly more impressive than that of a South American generalissimo would be standing before the doors to save patrons the unpleasant necessity of opening them for themselves. But now, in the afternoon, the Universal Joint was closed. There was no one inside but Primo Palveri, the manager and majority stockholder of the Great Universal, and the new strip act he was watching. Malone didn't particularly like the idea of sharing his conversation with a burlesque stripper, but there was little he could do about it; he'd waited several days for the appointment already.

As the doors opened he could hear a nasal voice, almost without over-tones, saying: "Now turn around, baby. Turn around." A pause, and then another voice, this one female:

"Is this all right, Mr. Palveri? You want me to show you something else?"

Malone shut the door quietly behind him. The female voice was coming from the throat of a semi-naked girl about five feet eight, with bright red hair and a wide, wide smile. She was staring at a chunky little black-haired man sunk in a chair, whose back was to Malone.

"What else do you do, Sweetheart?" the chunky man said. "Let me see whatever you do. I want some wide-talent stuff, you know, for the place. Class."

The girl smiled even wider. Malone was sure her teeth were about to fall out onto the floor, probably in a neat arrangement that spelled out Will You Kiss Me In The Dark Baby. That would take an awful lot of teeth, he reflected, but the stripper looked as if she could manage the job. "I dance and sing," she said. "I could do a dance for you, but my music is upstairs. You want me to go and get it?"

Palveri shook his head. "How about a song, baby? You mind singing without a piano?"

"I don't have anything prepared," the girl said, her eyes wide. "I didn't know this was going to be a special audition. I thought, you know, just a burlesque audition, so I didn't bring anything."

Palveri sank a little lower in the chair. "O.K., Sweetheart," he said. "You got a nice shape, you'll fit in the line anyhow. But just sing a song you know. How about that? If you make it with that, you could get yourself a featured spot. More dough."

The girl appeared to consider this proposition. "Gee," she said slowly. "I could do 'God Bless America'. O.K., Mr. Palveri?"

The chunky man sank even deeper toward the floor. "Never mind," he said. "Go get dressed, tell Tony you got the number five spot in the line. O.K.?"

"Gee," she said. "Maybe I could work on something and do it for you some other time, Mr. Palveri?"

He nodded wearily. "Some other time," he said. "Sure."

The girl went off through a door at the left of the club. Malone threaded his way past tables with chairs piled on top of them until he came to Palveri's side. The club owner was sitting on a single chair dragged off the heap that stood on a table next to him. He didn't turn around. "Mr. Malone," he said, "take another chair, sit down and we'll talk. O.K.?"

Malone blinked. "How'd you know I was there?" he said. "Much less who I was?"

"In this business," Palveri said, still without turning, "you learn to notice things, Mr. Malone. I heard you come in and wait. Who else would you be?"

Malone took a chair from the pile and set it up next to Palveri's. The chunky man turned to face him for the first time. Malone took a deep breath and tried to look hard and tough as he studied the club owner.

Palveri had small, sunken eyes decorated with bluish bags below and tufted black eyebrows above. The eyes were very cold. The rest of his face didn't warm things up any; he had an almost lipless slash for a mouth, a small reddish nose and cheeks that could have used either a shave or a good sandblasting job.

"You said you wanted to see me," Palveri began after a second. "But you didn't

say what about. What's up, Mr. Malone?''

''I've been looking around,'' Malone said in what he hoped was a grim, no-nonsense tone. ''Checking things. You know.''

''Checking?'' Palveri said. ''What's this about?''

Malone shrugged. He fished out a cigarette and lit it. ''Castelnuovo in Chicago sent me down,'' he said. ''I've been doing some checking around for him.''

Palveri's eyes narrowed slightly. Malone puffed on the cigarette and tried to act cool. ''You throwing names around to impress me?'' the club owner said at last.

''I'm not throwing names around,'' Malone said grimly. ''Castelnuovo wants me to look around, that's all.''

''Castelnuovo's a big man in Chicago,'' Palveri said. ''He wouldn't send a guy down without telling me about it.''

''He did,'' Malone said. He thought back to the FBI files on Giacomo Castelnuovo, which took up a lot of space in Washington, even on microfilm. ''You want proof?'' he said. ''He's got a scar over his ribs on the left side—got it from a bullet in '62. He wears a little black mustache because he thinks he looks like an old-time TV star, but he doesn't, much. He's got three or four girls on the string, but the only one he cares about is Carla Bragonzi. He—''

''O.K.,'' Palveri said. ''O.K., O.K. You know him. You're not fooling, around. But how come he sends you down without telling me?''

Malone shrugged. ''I've been here two weeks,'' he said. ''You didn't know I was around, did you? That's the way Castelnuovo wanted it.''

''He thinks I'd cheat him?'' Palveri said, his face changing color slightly. ''He thinks I'd dress up for him or drag down? He knows me better than that.''

Malone took a puff of his cigarette. ''Maybe he just wants to be sure,'' he said. ''Funny things are happening all over.'' The cigarette tasted terrible and he put it out in an ashtray from the chair-covered table.

''You're telling me,'' Palveri said. ''Things are crazy. What I'm thinking is this: Maybe Castelnuovo wants to keep this place operating. Maybe he wants to keep me here working for him.''

''And if he does?'' Malone said.

''If he does, he's going to have to pay for it,'' Palveri said firmly. ''The place needs dough to keep operating. I've got to have a loan, or else I'm going under.''

''The place is making money,'' Malone said.

Palveri shook his head vigorously. He reached into a pocket and took out a gold cigar case. He flipped it open. ''Have one,'' he told Malone.

An FBI Agent, Malone told himself, had no business smoking cigars and looking undignified. But as a messenger from Castelnuovo, he could do as he pleased.

He almost reached for one before he realized that maybe, sometime in the future, Palveri would find out who Kenneth J. Malone really was. And then he'd remember Malone smoking cigars, and that would be bad for the dignity of the FBI. Reluctantly, he drew his hand back.

"No, thanks," he said. "Never touch 'em."

"To each his own," Palveri muttered. He took out a cigar, lit it and returned the case to his pocket. The immediate vicinity became crowded with smoke. Malone breathed deeply.

"About the money—" Malone said after a second.

Palveri snorted. "The place is making half of what I'm losing," he said. "You got to see it this way, Malone: the contacts are gone."

"Contacts?" Malone said.

Palveri nodded. "The mayor's resigned, remember?" he said. "You saw that. Everybody's getting investigated. A couple of weeks ago the Golden Palace guy knocked himself off, and where does that leave me? He's my only contact with half the State boys; hell, he ran the whole string of clubs here, more or less. Castelnuovo knows all that."

"Sure," Malone said. "But you can make new contacts."

"Where?" Palveri said. He flung out his arms. "When nobody knows what's going to happen tomorrow? I tell you, Malone, it's like a curse on me."

Malone decided to push the man a little farther. "Castelnuovo," he said with what he hoped was a steely glint in his eyes, "isn't going to like a curse ruining business." He took another deep breath of tobacco smoke.

"Primo Palveri don't like it either," Palveri said. "You think whatever you like but that's the way things are. It's like Prohibition except we're losing all the way down the line. Listen, and I'll tell you something you didn't pick up around town."

"Go ahead," Malone said.

Palveri blew out some more smoke. "You know about the shipments?" he said. "The stuff from out on the desert?"

Malone nodded. The FBI had a long file on the possibility of Castelnuovo, through Palveri or someone else in the vicinity, shipping peyotl buttons from Nevada and New Mexico all over the country. Until this moment, it had only been a possibility.

"Mike Sand wanted to get in on some of that," Palveri said. "Well, it's big money, a guy figures he's got to have competition. But it's business nowadays, not a shooting war. That went out forty years ago."

"So?" Malone said, acting impatient.

"I'm getting there," Palveri said. "I'm getting there. Mike Sand and his truckers, they tried to high jack a shipment coming through out on the desert. Now, the

Trucker's Union is old and experienced, maybe, but not as old and experienced as the Mafia. It figures we can take them, right?''

''It figures,'' Malone agreed. ''But you didn't?''

Palveri looked doleful. ''It's like a curse,'' he said. ''Two boys wounded and one of them dead, right there on the sand. The shipment gone, and Mike Sand on his way to the East with it. A curse.'' He sucked some more at the cigar.

Malone looked thoughtful and concerned. ''Things are certainly bad,'' he said. ''But how's money going to make things any better?''

Palveri almost dropped his cigar. Malone watched it lovingly. ''Help?'' the club owner said. ''With money I could stay open, I could stay alive. Listen, I had investments, nice guaranteed stuff: real estate, some California oil stuff ... you know the kind of thing.''

''Sure,'' Malone said.

''Now that the contacts are gone and everybody's dead or resigned or being investigated,'' Palveri said, ''what do you think's happened to all that? Down the drain, Malone.''

Malone said: ''But—''

''And not only that,'' Palveri said, waving the cigar. ''The club was going good, and you know I thought about building a second one a little farther out. A straight investment, get me: an honest one.''

Malone nodded as if he knew all about it.

''So I got the foundation in, Malone,'' Palveri said, ''and it's just sitting there, not doing anything. A whole foundation going to pot because I can't do anything more with it. Just sitting there because everything's going to hell with itself.''

''In a handbasket,'' Malone said automatically.

Palveri gave him a violent nod. ''You said it, Malone,'' he added. ''Everything. My men, too.'' He sighed. ''And the contractor after me for his dough. Good old Harry Seldon, everybody's friend. Sure. Owe him some money and find out how friendly he is. Talks about nothing but figures. Ten thousand. Twelve thousand.''

''Tough,'' Malone said. ''But what do you mean about your men?''

''Mistakes,'' Palveri said. ''Book-keepers throwing the computers off and croupiers making mistakes paying off and collecting—and always mistakes against me, Malone. Always. It's like a curse. Even the hotel bills—three of them this week were made out too small and the customer paid up and went before I found out about it.''

''It sounds like a curse,'' Malone said. ''Either that or there are spies in the organization.''

''Spies?'' Palveri said. ''With the checking we do? With the way I've known some of these guys from childhood? They were little kids with me, Malone. They

stuck with me all the way. And with Castelnuovo, too,'' he added hurriedly.

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''But they could still be spies.''

Palveri nodded sadly. ''I thought of that,'' he said. ''I fired four of them. Four of my childhood friends, Malone. It was like cutting off an arm. And all it did was leave me with one arm less. The same mistakes go on happening.''

Malone stood up and heaved a sigh. ''Well,'' he said, ''I'll see what I can do.''

''I'd appreciate it, Malone,'' Palveri said. ''And when Primo Palveri appreciates something, he appreciates it. Get what I mean?''

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''I'll report back and let you know what happens.''

Palveri looked just as anxious, but a little hopeful. ''I need the dough,'' he said. ''I really need it.''

''With dough,'' Malone said, ''you could fix up what's been happening?''

Palveri shrugged. ''Who knows?'' he said. ''But I could stay open long enough to find out.''

Malone went back to the gaming room feeling that he had learned something, but not being quite sure what. Obviously whatever organization was mixing everything up was paying just as much attention to gangsters as to congressmen and businessmen. The simple justice of this arrangement did not escape Malone, but he failed to see where it led him.

He considered the small chance that Palveri would actually call Castelnuovo and check up on Kenneth J. Malone, but he didn't think it was probable. Palveri was too desperate to take the chance of making his boss mad in case Malone's story were true. And, even if the check were made, Malone felt reasonably confident. It's hard to kill a man who has a good, accurate sense of precognition and who can teleport himself out of any danger he might get into. Not impossible, but hard. Being taken for a ride in the desert, for instance, might be an interesting experience, but could hardly prove inconvenient to anybody except the driver of the car and the men holding the guns.

The gaming room wasn't any fuller, he noticed. He wended his way back to the bar for a bourbon-and-water and greeted the bartender morosely. The drink came along and he sipped at it quietly, trying to put things together in his mind. The talk with Palveri, he felt sure, had provided an essential clue—maybe the essential clue—to what was going on. But he couldn't find it.

''Mess,'' he said quietly. ''Everything's in a mess. And so what?''

A voice behind him picked that second to say: ''Gezundheit.'' Malone didn't turn. Instead he looked at the bar mirror, and one glance at what was reflected there was enough to freeze him as solid as the core of Pluto.

Lou was there. Lou Gehrig or whatever her name was, the girl behind the reception desk of the New York offices of the Psychical Research Society. That, in

itself, didn't bother him. The company of a beautiful girl while drinking was not something Malone actually hated. But she knew he was an FBI Agent, and she might pick any second to blat it out in the face of an astonished bartender. This, Malone told himself, would not be pleasant. He wondered just how to hush her up without attracting attention. Knock-out pills in her drink? A hand over her mouth? A sudden stream of unstoppable words?

He had reached no decision when she sat down on the stool beside him, turned a bright, cheerful smile in his direction and said: "I've forgotten your name. Mine's Luba Ardanko."

"Oh," Malone said dully. Even the disclosure of what "Lou" stood for did nothing to raise his spirits.

"I'm always forgetting things," Lou went on. "I've forgotten just about everything about you."

Malone breathed a long, inaudible sigh of relief. If more people, he thought, had the brains not to greet FBI Agents by name, rank and serial number when meeting them in a strange place, there would be fewer casualties among the FBI.

He realized that Luba was still smiling at him expectantly. "My name's Malone," he said. "Kenneth Malone. I'm a cookie manufacturer, remember?"

"Oh," Luba said delightedly. "Sure! I remember last time I met you you gave me that lovely box of cookies. Modeled on the Seven Dwarfs."

Occasionally, Malone told himself, things moved a little faster than he liked. "On the Seven Dwarfs," he said. "Oh, sure."

"And I thought the model of Sneezy was awfully cute," she said. "But don't let's talk about cookies. Let's talk about Martinis."

Malone opened his mouth, tried to think of something clever to say, and shut it again. Luba Ardanko was, perfectly obviously, altogether too fast for him. But then, he reflected, I've had a hard day. "All right," he said at last. "What about Martinis?"

Luba's smile broadened. "I'd like one," she said. "And since you're a wealthy cookie manufacturer—"

"Be my guest," Malone said. "On the other hand, why not buy your own? Since they're free as long as you're in the gambling room."

The bartender had approached them silently. "That's right," he said in a voice that betrayed the fact that he had memorized the entire speech, word for word. "Drinks are free for those who play the gaming tables. A courtesy of the Great Universal."

He delivered a Martini and Luba drank it while Malone finished his bourbon-and-water. "Well," she said, "I suppose we've got to go to the gambling tables now. If only to be fair."

"A horrible fate," Malone agreed, "but there you are: that's life."

"It certainly is," she said brightly, and moved off. Malone, shaking his head, went after her and found her standing in front of a roulette wheel. "I just love roulette," she said, turning. "Don't you? It's so exciting and expensive."

Malone licked dry lips, said: "Sure," and started to move off.

"Oh, let's just play a little," Luba said.

There was nothing to do but agree. Malone put a small stack of silver dollars on Red, and the croupier looked up with a bored expression. There were three other people in the game, including a magnificent old lady with blue hair who spent her money with a lavish hand. Two weeks before, she wouldn't even have been noticed. Now the croupier was bending over backward in an attempt not to show how grateful he was for the patronage.

The wheel spun around and landed on Number Two, Black. Malone sighed and fished for more money. He felt his precognitive sense beginning to come into play and happily decided to ride with it. This time the stack of silver dollars was larger.

Twenty minutes later he left the table approximately nine hundred dollars richer. Luba was beaming. "There, now," she said. "Wasn't that fun?"

"Hysterical," Malone said. He glanced back over his shoulder. The blue-haired old lady was winning and losing large sums with a speed and aplomb that was certainly going to make her a twenty-four-hour legend by the end of the evening. She looked grim and secure, as if she were undergoing a penance. Malone shrugged and looked away.

"Now," Luba said, "you can take me dancing."

"I can?" Malone said. "I mean, do I? I mean—"

"I mean the Solar Room," Luba said. "I've always wanted to enter on the arms of a handsome cookie manufacturer. It will make me the sensation of New York society."

The Solar Room was magnificently expensive. Malone had been there once, establishing his character as a man of lavish appetites, and had then avoided the place in deference to his real bankroll. He remembered it as the kind of place where an order of scrambled eggs was liable to come in, flaming, on a golden sabre. But Luba wanted the Solar Room, and Malone was not at all sure she wouldn't use blackmail if he turned her down. "Fine," he said in a lugubrious tone.

The place shone, when they entered, as if they had come in from the darkness of midnight. Along with the Universal Joint, it was the pride and glory of the Great Universal Hotel and no expense had been spared in the attempt to give it what Primo Palveri called Class. Couples and foursomes were scattered around at the marble-topped tables, and red-uniformed waiters scurried around bearing drinks,

food and even occasional plug-in telephones. There seemed to be more of the last than Malone remembered as usual; people were worrying about investments and businesses, and even those who had decided to stick it out grimly at Las Vegas and, enjoy themselves had to check up with the home folks in order to know when to start pricing windows in high buildings. Malone wondered how many people were actually getting their calls through. Since the first breakdown two weeks before, Las Vegas and virtually every other United States city had suffered interruptions in telephone service. Las Vegas had had three breakdowns in two weeks; other cities weren't doing much better, if at all.

Vaguely, Malone began looking around for handbaskets.

"Let's dance," Luba said happily. "They're playing our song."

On a stand at the front of the room a small orchestra was working away busily. There were two or three couples on the postage-stamp dance floor, whirling away to the strains of something Malone dimly remembered as: "My heart's in orbit out in space until I see you again."

"Our song?" he said.

Luba nodded. "You sang it to me the very first time we met," she said. "At the cookie-manufacturer's ball. Remember?"

Malone sighed. If Luba wanted to dance, Luba was going to dance. And so was Malone. He rose and they went to the dance floor. Malone took her in his arms and for a few bars they danced silently. At the end of that time they were much closer together than they had been, and Malone realized that he was somehow managing to enjoy himself. Thoroughly.

He thought dimly of the stripper he'd seen when he walked in on Palveri. Like Luba, she had red hair. But somehow, she looked less attractive undressed than Luba did in a complete wardrobe. Malone wondered what the funny feeling creeping up his spine was. After a second he realized that it wasn't love. Luba's hand was tickling him. He shifted slightly and the hand left, but the funny feeling remained.

Maybe it was love, he thought. He didn't know whether or not to hope so.

Luba was pressed close to him. He wondered how to open the conversation, and decided that a sudden passionate declaration would be more startling than welcome. At last he said: "Thanks for not tipping my hand."

Luba's whisper caressed his ear. "Don't thank me," she said. "I enjoyed it."

"Why are you doing this?" Malone said. "Not that I don't appreciate it, but I thought you were sore."

"Let's just say that your masterful, explosive approach was irresistible," Luba said.

Malone wondered briefly whether or not they'd turned off the air-condition-

ing. If he moved slightly away from Luba, he thought, he could breathe more easily. But breathing just wasn't worth it. "I will cheerfully admit," he said, "that I am a ball of fire in the feathers, as they say. But I didn't realize it was that obvious—even to a woman of your tender sensitivity."

Somehow, Luba had managed to get even closer to him. "You touch me deeply," she whispered into his ear.

Malone swallowed hard and tried to take another breath. Just one more, he thought; that would be all he needed. "What are you doing in Las Vegas?" he asked in what he hoped was a casual tone. It didn't sound very casual, though.

"I'm on vacation," Luba said in an off-handed manner. "I won't ask what you're doing; I can guess pretty well. Besides, you obviously want to keep it under cover."

"Well," Malone said, "I certainly wouldn't want what I'm doing to be broadcast aloud to the great American public out there in television-land." It was a long speech for a man without any breath. Just one more, Malone told himself, and he could die happy.

"I felt that," Luba said. "You know, Mr. Malone—"

"Call me Ken," Malone said.

"It is silly to be formal now, isn't it?" Luba said. "You know, Ken, I'm beginning to realize that you are really a very nice person—in spite of your rather surprising method of attack."

"What's surprising about it?" Malone said. "People do it all the time."

The orchestra suddenly shifted from the previous slow number to a rapid fire tune Malone couldn't remember having heard before. "That," he announced, "is too fast for me. I'm going to get some fresh air."

Luba nodded, her red hair brushing Malone's cheek silkily. "I'm coming, too," she said.

Surrounding the Great Universal, Malone remembered, was a small belt of parkland. He flagged a hallway car—remembering carefully to check whether or not the driver was the sniggering Murray—and he and Luba piled in and started out for the park. In the car, he held her hand silently, feeling a little like a bashful schoolboy and a little like Sir Kenneth Malone. It was a strange mixture, but he decided that he liked it.

They got out, standing in the cool darkness of the park. Overhead a moon and stars were shining. The little hallway car rolled away and they were alone. Completely alone. Malone swallowed hard.

"Sleuth," Luba said softly in the darkness.

Malone turned to face her.

"Sleuth," she said, "don't you ever take a chance?"

"Chance?" Malone said.

"Damn it," Luba said in a soft, sweet voice, "kiss me, Ken."

Malone had no answer to that—at least, no verbal answer. But then, one didn't seem to be needed.

When he finally came up for air, he said: "Lou—"

"Yes, Ken?"

"Lou, how long are you going to be here? Or in New York? What I mean is—"

"I'll be around," Lou said. "I will be going back to New York of course; after all, Ken, I do have a living to make, such as it is, and Sir Lewis is expecting me."

"I don't know," Malone said, "but it still sounds funny. A girl like you working for ... well, for the Psychical Research people. Ghosts and ectoplasm and all that."

Suddenly Lou wasn't in his arms any more. "Now, wait a minute," she said. "You seemed to need their information, all right."

"But that was ... oh, well," Malone said. "Never mind. Maybe I'm silly. It really doesn't matter."

"I guess it doesn't, now," Lou said in a softer tone. "Except that it does mean I'll be going back to New York pretty soon."

"Oh," Malone said. "But ... look, Lou, maybe we could work something out. I could tell Sir Lewis I needed you here for something, and then he'd—"

"My, my," she said. "What it must be like to have all that influence."

"What?" Malone said.

Lou grinned, almost invisibly. "Nothing," she said. "Nothing. But, my fine feathered Fed, I don't want to be pulled around on somebody else's string."

"But—"

"I mean it, Ken," Luba said.

Malone shrugged. "Suppose we table it for now, then," he said, "and get around to it later. At dinner, say ... around nine?"

"And just where," Luba said, "will you be before nine? Making improper advances to the local contingent of chorines?"

"I will make improper advances," Malone vowed, "only to you, Lou."

Lou's eyes sparkled. "Goody," she said. "I've always wanted to be a Fallen Woman."

"But I have got some things to do before nine," Malone said. "I've got to work, too."

"Well, then," Lou said in a suspiciously sweet voice, "suppose I talk to Sir Lewis Carter, and tell him to keep you in New York? Then—"

"Enough," Malone said. "Nine o'clock."

## XI

Somebody somewhere was wishing all the world "a plague on both your houses," and making it stick. Confusion is fun in a comedy—but in the pilot of a plane or an executive of a nation....

ack in his room, Malone put on a fresh shirt, checked the .44 Magnum in his shoulder holster, changed jackets, adjusted his hat to the proper angle, and vanished.

He had, he'd realized, exactly one definite lead. And now he was going to follow up on it. The Government was apparently falling to pieces; so was business and so was the Mafia. Nobody Malone had heard of had gained anything. Except Mike Sand and his truckers. They'd beaten the Mafia, at least.

Sand was worth a chat. Malone had a way to get in to see him, but he had to work fast. Otherwise Sand would very possibly know what Malone was trying to do. And that might easily be dangerous.

He had made his appearance in the darkness beneath one of the bridges at the southwest side of Central Park, in New York. It was hardly Malone's idea of perfect comfort, but it did mean safety; there was very seldom anyone around after dark, and the shadows were thick enough so that his "appearance" would only mean, to the improbable passerby, that he had stepped out into the light.

Now he strolled quietly over to Central Park West, and flagged a taxi heading downtown. He'd expected to run into one of the roving muggers who still made the Park a trap for the unwary—he'd almost looked forward to it, in a way—but nobody appeared. It was unusual, but he didn't have time to wonder about it.

The headquarters for the National Brotherhood of Truckers was east of Greenwich Village, on First Avenue, so Malone had plenty of time to think things out while the cab wended its laborious southeast way. After a few minutes he realized that he would have even more time to think than he'd planned on.

"Lots of traffic for this time of night," he volunteered.

The cabbie, a fiftyish man with a bald, wrinkled head and surprisingly bright blue eyes, nodded without turning his head. "Maybe you think this is bad," he said. "You would not recognize the place an hour earlier, friend. During the real rush hour, I mean. Things are what they call meshuggah, friend. It means crazy."

"How come?" Malone said.

"The subway is on strike since last week," the cabbie said. "The buses are also on strike. This means that everybody is using a car. They can make it faster if they wish to walk, but they use a car. It does not help matters, believe me."

"I can see that," Malone murmured.

"And the cops are not doing much good either," the cabbie went on, "since

they went on strike sometime last Tuesday.''

Malone nodded, and then did a double-take. ''Cops?'' he said. ''On strike? But that's illegal. They could be arrested.''

''You can be funny,'' the cabbie said. ''I am too sad to be funny.''

''But—''

''Unless you are from Rhode Island,'' the cabbie said, ''or even farther away, you are deaf, dumb and blind. Everybody in New York knows what is going on by this time. I admit that it is not in the newspapers, but the newspapers do not tell the truth since, as I remember it, the City Council election of 1924, and then it is an accident, due to the major's best friend working in the printing plants.''

''But cops can't go on strike,'' Malone said plaintively.

''This,'' the cabbie said in a judicious tone, ''is true. But they do not give out any parking tickets any more, or any traffic citations either. They are working on bigger things, they say, and besides all this there are not so many cops on the force now. They are spread very thin.''

Malone could see what was coming. ''Arrests of policemen,'' he said, ''and resignations.''

''And investigations,'' the cabbie said. ''Mayor Amalfi is a good Joe and does not want anything in the papers until a real strike comes along, but the word gets out anyhow, as it always does.''

''Makes driving tough,'' Malone said.

''People can make better time on their hands and knees,'' the cabbie said, ''with the cops pulling a strike. They concentrate on big items now, and you can even smoke in the subways if you can find a subway that is running.''

Malone stopped to think how much of the city's income depended on parking tickets and small fines, and realized that a ''strike'' like the one the police were pulling might be very effective indeed. And, unlike the participants in the Boston Police Strike of sixty-odd years before, these cops would have public sentiment on their side—since they were keeping actual crime down.

''How long do they think it's going to last?'' Malone said.

''It can be over tomorrow,'' the cabbie said, ''but this is not generally believed in the most influential quarters. Mayor Amalfi and the new Commissioner try to straighten things out all day long, but the way things go straightening them out does no good. Something big is in the wind, friend. I—''

The cab, on Second Avenue and Seventeenth Street, stopped for a traffic light. Malone felt an itch in the back of his mind, as if his prescience were trying to warn him of something; he'd felt it for a little while, he realized, but only now could he pay attention to it.

The door on the driver's side opened suddenly, and so did the door next to

Malone. Two young men, obviously in their early twenties, were standing in the openings, holding guns that were plainly intended for immediate use.

The one next to the driver said, in a flat voice: "Don't nobody get wise. That way nobody gets hurt. Give us—"

That was as far as he got.

When the rear door had opened, Malone had had a full second to prepare himself, which was plenty of time. The message from his precognitive powers had come along just in time.

The second gunman thrust his gun into the cab. He seemed almost to be handing it to Malone politely, and this effect was spoiled only by Malone's twist of the gunman's wrist, which must have felt as if he'd put his hand into a loop tied to the axle of a high-speed centrifuge. The gunman let go of the gun and Malone, spurning it, let it drop.

He didn't need it. His other hand had gone into his coat and come out again with the .44 Magnum.

The thug at the front of the car had barely realized what was happening by the time it was all over. Automatic reflexes turned him away from the driver and toward the source of danger, his gun pointing toward Malone. But the reflexes gave out as he found himself staring down a rifled steel tube which, though hardly more than seven-sixteenths of an inch in diameter, must have looked as though a high-speed locomotive might come roaring out of it at any second.

Malone hardly needed to bark: "Drop it!" The revolver hit the seat next to the cabbie.

"Driver," Malone said in a conversational voice, "can you handle a gun?"

"Why, it is better than even that I still can," the cabbie said. "I am in the business myself many years ago, before I see the error of my ways and buy a taxi with the profits I make. It is a high-pay business," he went on, "but very insecure."

The cabbie scooped up the weapon by his side, flipped out the cylinder expertly to check the cartridges, flipped it back in and centered the muzzle on the gunman who'd dropped the revolver.

"It is more than thirty years since I use one of these," he said gently, "but I do not forget how to pull the trigger, and at this range I can hardly miss."

Malone noticed vaguely that he was still holding hands with the second gunman, and that this one was trying to struggle free. Malone shrugged and eased off a bit, at the same time shifting his own aim. The .44 Magnum now pointed at gunman number two, and the cabbie was aiming at gunman number one. The tableau was silent for some seconds.

"Now," Malone said at last, "we wait. Driver, if you would sort of lean against your horn button, we might be able to speed things up a little. The light has turned

green.''

''The local constables,'' the cabbie said, ''do not bother with stalled cars in traffic these days.''

''But,'' Malone pointed out, ''I have a hunch no cop could resist a taxi which is not only stalled and blocking traffic but is also blatting its horn continuously. Strike or no strike,'' he finished sententiously, ''there are things beyond the power of man to ignore.''

''Friend,'' the cabbie said, ''you convince me. It is a good move.'' He sagged slightly against the horn button, keeping the gun centered at all times on the man before him.

The horn began to wail horribly.

The first gunman swallowed nervously. ''Hey, now, listen,'' he said, shouting slightly above the horn. ''This wasn't anything. Just a gag, see? A little gag. We was playing a joke. On a friend.''

The driver addressed Malone. ''Do you ever see either of these boys before?''

''Never,'' Malone said.

''Nor do I,'' the cabbie said. He eyed the gunman. ''We are not your friend,'' he said. ''Either of us.''

''No, no,'' the gunman said. ''Not you. This friend, he ... uh ... owns a taxi, and we thought this was it. It was kind of a joke, see? A friendly joke, that's all. Believe me, the gun's not even loaded. Both of them aren't. Phony bullets, honest. Believe me?''

''Why, naturally I believe you,'' the cabbie said politely. ''I never doubt the word of a stranger, especially such an honest-appearing stranger as you seem to be. And since the gun is loaded with false bullets, as you say, all you have to do is reach over and take it away from me.''

There was a short silence.

''A joke,'' the gunman said feebly. ''Honest, just a joke.''

''We believe you,'' Malone assured him grandly. ''As a matter of fact, we appreciate the joke so much that we want you to tell it to a panel of twelve citizens, a judge and a couple of lawyers, so they can appreciate it, too. They get little fun out of life and your joke may give them a few moments of happiness. Why hide your light under an alibi?''

The horn continued its dismal wail for a few seconds more before two patrolmen and a sergeant came up on horses. It took somewhat more time than that for Malone to convince the sergeant that he didn't have time to go down to the station to prefer charges. He showed his identification and the police were suitably impressed.

''Lock 'em up for violating the Sullivan Law,'' he said. ''I'm sure they don't have

licenses for these lovely little guns of theirs.''

''Probably not,'' the sergeant agreed. ''There's been an awful lot of this kind of thing going on lately. But here's an idea: the cabbie here can come on with us.''

The top of the cabbie's head turned pale. ''That,'' he said, ''is the trouble with being a law-abiding citizen such as I have been for upwards of thirty years. Because I do not want to lose twenty dollars to these young strangers, I lose twenty dollars' worth of time in a precinct station, the air of which is very bad for my asthma.''

Malone, taking the hint, dug a twenty out of his pockets, and then added another to it, remembering how much he had spent in Las Vegas, where his money funneled slowly into the pockets of Primo Palveri. The cabbie took the money with haste and politeness and stowed it away.

''Gentlemen,'' he said, ''I am now prepared to spend the entire night signing affidavits, if enough affidavits can be dug up.'' He looked pleased.

''Mr. Malone,'' the sergeant said wearily, ''people just don't realize what's going on in this town. We never did have half enough cops, and now, with so many men resigning and getting arrested and suspended, we haven't got a quarter enough. People think this strike business is funny, but if we spent any time fiddling around with traffic and parking tickets, we'd never have time to stop even crimes like this, let alone the big jobs. As it is, though, there haven't been a lot of big ones. Every hood in the city's out to make a couple of bucks—but that's it so far, thank God.''

Malone nodded. ''How about the FBI?'' he said. ''Want them to come in and help?''

''Mr. Malone,'' the sergeant said, ''the City of New York can take very good care of itself, without outside interference.''

Some day, Malone told himself, good old New York City was going to secede from the Union and form a new country entirely. Then it would have a war with New Jersey and probably be wiped right off the map.

Viewing the traffic around him as he hunted for another cab, he wasn't at all sure that that was a bad idea. He began to wish vaguely that he had borrowed one of the policemen's horses.

Malone wasn't in the least worried about arriving at Mike Sand's office late. In the first place, Sand was notorious for sleeping late and working late to make up for it. His work schedule was somewhere around forty-five degrees out of phase with the rest of the world, which made it just about average for the National Brotherhood of Truckers. It had never agitated for a nine-to-five work day. A man driving a truck, after all, worked all sorts of odd hours—and the union officials did the same, maybe just to prove that they were all good truckers at heart.

The sign over the door read:

National Headquarters

NATIONAL BROTHERHOODOF TRUCKERS

Welcome, Brother

Malone pushed at the door and it swung open, revealing a rather dingy-looking foyer. More Good Old Truckers At Heart, he told himself. Mike Sand owned a quasi-palatial mansion in Puerto Rico for winter use, and a two-floor, completely air-conditioned apartment on Fifth Avenue for summer use. But the Headquarters Building looked dingy enough to make truckers conscience-stricken about paying back dues.

Behind the reception desk there was a man whose face was the approximate shape and color of a slightly used waffle. He looked up from his crossword puzzle as Malone came in, apparently trying to decide whether or not this new visitor should be greeted with: "Welcome, Brother!"

Taking pity on his indecision, Malone strode to the desk and said: "Tell Mike Sand he has a visitor."

The waffle-faced man blinked. "Mr. Sand is busy right now," he said. "Who wants to talk to him?"

Malone tried to look steely-eyed and tough. "You pick up the intercom," he said, "and you tell Sand there's a man out here who's in the cloak-and-suit business."

"The what?"

"Tell him this man is worried about a recent shipment of buttons," Malone went on.

"Mister," the waffle-faced man said, "you're nuts."

"So I'm nuts," Malone said. "Make the call."

It was put through. After a few minutes of earnest conversation the man turned to look at Malone again, dizzied wonder in his eyes. "Mr. Sand says go right up," he told the FBI Agent in a shocked voice. "Elevator to the third floor."

Malone went over to the elevator, stepped in and pressed the third-floor button. As the doors closed, the familiar itch of precognition began to assail him again. This time he had nothing else to distract him. He paid very close attention to it as he was carried slowly and creakily upward.

He looked up. There was an escape-hatch in the top of the car. Standing on tiptoe, he managed to lift it aside, grasp the edges of the resulting hole and pull himself up through the hole to the top of the car. He looked back down, memorizing the elevator, and then pulled the hatch shut again. There was a small peephole in it, and Malone put his eye to it and waited.

About twenty seconds later, the car stopped and the doors opened. A little more time passed, and then a gun, closely followed by a man, edged around the

door frame.

"What the hell," the man said. "The car's empty!"

Another voice said: "Let's cover the stairway."

Two pairs of footsteps receded rapidly down the hall. Malone, gun in hand, teleported himself back to the previously memorized elevator, tiptoed to the door and looked out. The two men were standing at the far end of the hall, posted at either side of the stairwell and obviously waiting for him to come on up.

Instead, he tiptoed out of the elevator hefting his gun, and came up silently behind the pair. When he was within ten feet he stopped and said, very politely: "Drop the guns, boys."

The guns thudded to the floor and the two men turned round.

"All right," Malone said, smiling into their astonished faces. "Now, let's go on and see Mr. Sand."

He picked up the guns with his free hand and put them into his coat pockets. Together, the three men went down toward the lighted office at the far end of the hall.

"Open it," Malone said as they came to the door. He followed them into the office. Behind a battered, worm-eaten desk in a dingy room sat a very surprised-looking Mike Sand.

He was only about five feet six, but he looked as if weighed over two hundred pounds. He had huge shoulders and a thick neck, and his face was sleepy-looking. He seemed to have lost a lot of fights in his long career; Sand, Malone reflected, was nearing fifty now, and he was beginning to look his age. His short hair, once black, was turning to iron-gray.

He didn't say anything. Malone smiled at him pleasantly. "These boys were carrying deadly weapons," he told Sand in a polite voice. "That's hardly the way to treat a brother." His precognitive warning system wasn't ringing any alarm bells, but he kept his gun trained on the pair of thugs as he walked over to Mike Sand's desk and took the two extra revolvers from his pocket. "You'd better keep these, Sand," he said. "Your boys don't know how to handle them."

Sand grinned sourly, pulled open a desk drawer and swept the guns into it with one motion of his ham-like hand. He didn't look at Malone. "You guys better go downstairs and keep Jerry company," he said. "You can do crossword puzzles together."

"Now, Mike, we—" one of them began.

Mike Sand snorted. "Go on," he said. "Scram."

"But he was supposed to be in the elevator, and we—"

"Scram," Sand said. It sounded like a curse. The two men got out. "Like apes in the trees," Sand said heavily. "Ask for bright boys and what do you get? Every-

thing,'' he went on dismally, ''is going to hell.''

That line, Malone reflected, was beginning to have all the persistence of a bass-bourdon. It droned its melancholy way through anything and everything else. He signed deeply, thought about a cigar and lit a cigarette instead. It tasted awful. ''About those buttons—'' he said.

''I got nothing to do with buttons,'' Sand said.

''You do with these,'' Malone said. ''A shipment of buttons from the Nevada desert. You grabbed them from Palveri.''

''I got nothing to do with it,'' Sand said.

Malone looked around and found a chair and an ashtray. He grabbed one and sat down in the other. ''I'm not from Castelnuovo,'' he said. ''Or Palveri, or any of the Mafia boys. If I were, you'd know it fast enough.''

Sand regarded him from under eyelids made almost entirely of scar-tissue. ''I guess so,'' he said sourly at last. ''But what do you want to know about the stuff? And who are you, anyhow?''

''The name's Malone,'' Malone said. ''You might say trouble is my business. Or something like that. I see an opportunity to create a little trouble—but not for you. That is, if you want to hear some more about those buttons. Of course, if you had nothing to do with it—''

''All right,'' Sand said. ''All right. But it was strictly a legitimate proposition, understand?''

''Sure,'' Malone said. ''Strictly legitimate.''

''Well, it was,'' Sand said defensively. ''We got to stop scab trucking, don't we? And that Palveri was using nonunion boys on the trucks. We had to stop them; it was a service to the Brotherhood, understand?''

''And the peyotl buttons?'' Malone asked.

Sand shrugged. ''So we had to confiscate the cargo, didn't we?'' he said. ''To teach them a lesson. Nonunion drivers, that's what we're against.''

''And you're for peyotl,'' Malone said, ''so you can make it into peyote and get enough money to refurbish Brotherhood Headquarters.''

''Now, look,'' Sand said. ''You think you're tough and you can get away with a lot of wisecracks. That's a wrong idea, brother.'' He didn't move, but he suddenly seemed set to spring. Malone wondered if, just maybe, his precognition had blown a fuse.

''O.K., let's forget it,'' he said. ''But I've got some inside lines, Sand. You didn't get the real shipment.''

''Didn't get it?'' Sand said with raised eyebrows. ''I got it. It's right where I can put my finger on it now.''

''That was the fake,'' Malone said easily. ''They knew you were after a ship-

ment, Sand, so they suckered you in. They fed your spies with false information and sent you out after the fake shipment.''

''Fake shipment?'' Sand said. ''It's the real stuff, brother. The real stuff.''

''But not enough of it,'' Malone said. ''Their big shipments are almost three times what you got. They made one while you were suckered off with the fake—and they're making another one next week. Interested?''

Sand snorted. ''The hell,'' he said. ''Didn't you hear me say I got the first shipment right where I can put my finger on it?''

''So?'' Malone said.

''So I can't get rid of it,'' Sand said. ''What do I want with a new load? Every day I hold the stuff is dangerous. You never know when somebody's going to look for it and maybe find it.''

''Can't get rid of it?'' Malone said. This was a new turn of events. ''What's happening?''

''Everything,'' Sand said tersely. ''Look, you want to sell me some information—but you don't know the setup. Maybe when I tell you, you'll stop bothering me.'' He put his head in his hands, and his voice, when he spoke again, was muffled. ''The contacts are gone,'' he said. ''With the arrests and the resignations and everything else, nobody wants to take any chances; the few guys that aren't locked up are scared they will be. I can't make any kind of a deal for anything. There just isn't any action.''

''Things are tough, huh?'' Malone said hopelessly. Apparently even Mike Sand wasn't going to pan out for him.

''Things are terrible,'' Sand said. ''The locals are having revolutions—guys there are kicking out the men from National Headquarters. Nobody knows where he stands any more—a lot of my organizers have been goofing up and getting arrested for one thing and another. Like apes in the trees, that's what.''

Malone nodded very slowly and took another puff of the cigarette. ''Nothing's going right,'' he said.

''Listen,'' Sand said. ''You want to hear trouble? My account books are in duplicate—you know? Just to keep things nice and peaceful and quiet.''

''One for the investigators and one for the money,'' Malone said.

''Sure,'' Sand said, preoccupied with trouble. ''You know the setup. But both sets are missing. Both sets.'' He raised his head, the picture of witless agony. ''I've got an idea where they are, too. I'm just waiting for the axe to fall.''

''O.K.,'' Malone said. ''Where are they?''

''The U. S. Attorney's Office,'' Sand said dismally. He stared down at his battered desk and sighed.

Malone stubbed out his cigarette. ''So you're not in the market for any more

buttons?" he said.

"All I'm in the market for," Sand said without raising his eyes, "is a nice, painless way to commit suicide."

Malone walked several blocks without noticing where he was going. He tried to think things over, and everything seemed to fall into a pattern that remained, agonizingly, just an inch or so out of his mental reach. The mental bursts, the trouble the United States was having, Palveri, Queen Elizabeth, Burris, Mike Sand, Dr. O'Connor, Sir Lewis Carter and even Luba Ardanko juggled and flowed in his mind like pieces out of a kaleidoscope. But they refused to form any pattern he could recognize.

He uttered a short curse and managed to collide with a bulky woman with frazzled black hair. "Pardon me," he said politely.

"The hell with it," the woman said, looking straight past him, and went jerkily on her way. Malone blinked and looked around him. There were a lot of people still on the streets, but they didn't look like normal New York City people. They were all curiously tense and wary, as if they were suspicious not only of him and each other, but even themselves. He caught sight of several illegal-looking bulges beneath men's armpits, and many heavily sagging pockets. One or two women appeared to be unduly solicitous of their large and heavy handbags. But it wasn't his job to enforce the Sullivan Law, he told himself. Especially while he was on vacation.

A single foot patrolman stood a few feet ahead, guarding a liquor store with drawn revolver, his eyes scanning the passers-by warily while he waited for help. Behind him, the smashed plate glass and broken bottles and the sprawled figure just inside the door told a fairly complete story.

Down the block, Malone saw several stores that carried Closed or Gone Out Of Business signs. The whole depressing picture gave him the feeling that all the tragedies of the 1930-1935 period had somehow been condensed into the past two weeks.

Ahead there was a chain drugstore, and Malone headed for it. Two uniformed men wearing Special Police badges were standing near the door eyeing everyone with suspicion, but Malone managed to get past them and went on to a telephone booth. He tried dialling the Washington number of the FBI, but got only a continuous beep-beep, indicating a service delay. Finally he managed to get a special operator, who told him sorrowfully that calls to Washington were jamming all available trunk lines.

Malone glanced around to make sure nobody was watching. Then he teleported himself to his apartment in Washington and, on arriving, headed for the phone there. Using that one, he dialed again, got Pelham's sad face on the screen, and asked for Thomas Boyd.

Boyd didn't look any different, Malone thought, though maybe he was a little more tired. Henry VIII had obviously had a hard day trying to get his wives to stop nagging him. "Ken," he said. "I thought you were on vacation. What are you doing calling up the FBI, or do you just want to feel superior to us poor working slobs?"

"I need some information," Malone said.

Boyd uttered a short, mirthless laugh. "How to beat the tables, you mean?" he said. "How are things in good old Las Vegas?"

Malone, realizing that with direct-dial phones Boyd had no idea where he was actually calling from, kept wisely quiet. "How about Burris?" he said after a second. "Has he come up with any new theories yet?"

"New theories?" Boyd said. "What about?"

"Everything," Malone said. "From all I see in the papers things haven't been quieting down any. Is it still Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch putting psychodrugs in water-coolers, or has something new been added?"

"I don't know what the chief thinks," Boyd said. "Things'll straighten out in a while. We're working on it—twenty-four hours a day, or damn near, but we're working. While you take a nice, long vacation that—"

"I want you to get me something," Malone said. "Just go and get it and send it to me at Las Vegas."

"Money?" Boyd said with raised eyebrows.

"Dossiers," Malone said. "On Mike Sand and Primo Palveri."

"Palveri I can understand," Boyd said. "You want to threaten him with exposure unless he lets you beat the roulette tables. But why Sand? Ken, are you working on something psionic?"

"Me?" Malone said sweetly. "I'm on vacation."

"The chief won't like—"

"Can you send me the dossiers?" Malone interrupted.

Boyd shook his head very slowly. "Ken, I can't do it without the chief finding out about it. If you are working on something ... hell, I'd like to help you. But I don't see how I can. You don't know what things are like here."

"What are they like?" Malone said.

"The full force is here," Boyd said. "As far as I know, you're the only vacation leave not canceled yet. And not only that, but we've got agents in from the Sureté and New Scotland Yard, agents from Belgium and Germany and Holland and Japan ... Ken, we've even got three MVD men here working with us."

"It's happening all over?" Malone said.

"All over the world," Boyd said. "Ken, I'm beginning to think we've got a case of Martian Invaders on our hands. Or something like it." He paused. "But we're

licking them, Ken," he went on. "Slowly but surely, we're licking them."

"How do you mean?" Malone said.

"Crime is down," Boyd said, "away down. Major crime, I mean—petty theft, assault, breaking and entering and that sort of thing has gone away up, but that's to be expected. Everything's going to—"

"Skip the handbasket," Malone said. "But you're working things out?"

"Sooner or later," Boyd said. "Every piece of equipment and every man in the FBI is working overtime; we can't be stopped forever."

"I'll wave flags," Malone said bitterly. "And I wish I could join you."

"Believe me," Boyd said, "you don't know when you're well off."

Malone switched off. He looked at his watch; it was ten-thirty.

**XII**

That made it eight-thirty in Las Vegas. Malone opened his eyes again in his hotel room there. He had half an hour to spare until his dinner date with Luba. That gave him plenty of time to shower, shave and dress, and he felt pleased to have managed the timing so neatly.

Two minutes later, he was soaking in the luxury of a hot tub allowing the warmth to relax his body while his mind turned over the facts he had collected. There were a lot of them, but they didn't seem to mean anything special.

The world, he told himself, was going to hell in a handbasket. That was all very well and good, but just what was the handbasket made of? Burris' theory, the more he thought about it, was a pure case of mental soapsuds, with perhaps a dash of old cotton-candy to make confusion even worse confounded.

And there wasn't any other theory, was there?

Well, Malone reflected, there was one, or at least a part of one. Her Majesty had said that everything was somehow tied up with the mental bursts—and that sounded a lot more probable. Assuming that the bursts and the rest of the mixups were not connected made, as a matter of fact, very little sense; it was multiplying hypotheses without reason. When two unusual things happen, they have at least one definite connection: they're both unusual. The sensible thing to do, Malone thought, was to look for more connections.

Which meant asking who was causing the bursts, and why. Her Majesty had said that she didn't know, and couldn't do it herself. Obviously, though, some telepath or a team of telepaths was doing the job. And the only trouble with that, Malone reflected sadly, was that all telepaths were in the Yucca Flats laboratory.

It was at this point that he sat upright in the tub, splashing water over the floor and gripping the soap with a strange excitement. Who'd ever said that all the telepaths were in Yucca Flats? All the ones so far discovered were—but that, ob-

viously, was an entirely different matter.

Her majesty didn't know about any others, true. But Malone thought of his own mind-shield. If he could make himself telepathically "invisible," why couldn't someone else? Dr. Marshall's theories seemed to point the other way—but they only went for telepaths like Her Majesty, who were psychotic. A sane telepath, Malone thought, might conceivably develop such a mind-shield.

All known telepaths were nuts, he told himself. Now, he began to see why. He'd started out, two years before, hunting for nuts, and for idiots. But they wouldn't even know anything about sane telepaths—the sane ones probably wouldn't even want to communicate with them.

A sane telepath was pretty much of an unknown quantity. But that, Malone told himself with elation, was exactly what he was looking for. Could a sane telepath do what an insane one couldn't—and project thoughts, or at least mental bursts?

He got out of the cooling tub and grabbed for a terry-cloth robe. Not even bothering about the time, he closed his eyes. When he opened them again he was in the Yucca Flats apartment of Dr. Thomas O'Connor.

O'Connor wasn't sleeping, exactly. He sat in a chair in his bare-looking living room, a book open on his lap, his head nodding slightly. Malone's entrance made no sounds, and O'Connor didn't move or look around.

"Doctor," Malone said, "is it possible that—"

O'Connor came up off the chair a good foot and a half. He went: "Eee," and came down again, still gripping the book. His head turned.

"It's me," Malone said.

"Indeed," O'Connor said. "Indeed indeed. My goodness." He opened his mouth some more but no words came out of it. "Eee," he said again, at last, in a conversational tone.

Malone took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I startled you," he said, "but this is important and it couldn't wait." O'Connor stared blankly at him. "Dr. O'Connor," Malone said, "it's me. Kenneth J. Malone. I want to talk to you."

At last O'Connor's expression returned almost to normal. "Mr. Malone," he said, "you are undressed."

Malone sighed. "This is important, doctor," he said. "Let's not waste time with all that kind of thing."

"But, Mr. Malone—" O'Connor began frostily.

"I need some information," Malone said, "and maybe you've got it. What do you know about telepathic projection?"

"About what?" O'Connor said. "Do you mean nontelepaths receiving some sort of ... communication from telepaths?"

"Right," Malone said. "Mind-to-mind communication, of course; I'm not inter-

ested in the United States mail or the telephone companies. How about it, doctor? Is it possible?''

O'Connor gnawed at his lower lip for a second. ''There have been cases reported,'' he said at last. ''Very few have been written up with any accuracy, and those seem to be confined to close relatives or loved ones of the person projecting the message.''

''Is that necessary?'' Malone said. ''Isn't it possible that—''

''Further,'' O'Connor said, getting back into his lecture-room stride, ''I think you'll find that the ... ah ... message so received is one indicating that the projector of such a message is in dire peril. He has, for instance, been badly injured, or is rapidly approaching death, or else he has narrowly escaped death.''

''What does that have to do with it?'' Malone said. ''I mean, why should all those requirements be necessary?''

O'Connor frowned slightly. ''Because,'' he said, ''the amount of psionic energy necessary for such a feat is tremendous. Usually, it is the final burst of energy, the outpouring of all the remaining psionic force immediately before death. And if death does not occur, the person is at the least greatly weakened; his mind, if it ever does recover, needs time and rest to do so.''

''And he reaches a relative or a loved one,'' Malone said, ''because the linkage is easier; there's some thought of him in that other mind for him to 'tune in' on.''

''We assume so,'' O'Connor said.

''Very well, then,'' Malone said. ''I'll assume so, too. But if the energy is so great, then a person couldn't do this sort of thing very often.''

''Hardly,'' O'Connor said.

Malone nodded. ''It's like ... like giving blood to a blood bank,'' he said. ''Giving ... oh, three quarts of blood. It might not kill you. But if it didn't, you'd be weak for a long time.''

''Exactly,'' O'Connor said. ''A good analogy, Mr. Malone.'' Malone looked at him and felt relieved that he'd managed to get the conversation onto pure lecture-room science so quickly. O'Connor, easily at home in that world, had been able to absorb the shock of Malone's sudden appearance while providing the facts in his own inimitable, frozen manner.

''So one telepath couldn't go on doing it all the time,'' he said. ''But—how about several people?''

''Several people?'' O'Connor said.

''I mean ... well, let's look at that blood bank again,'' Malone said. ''You need three quarts of blood. But one person doesn't have to give it. Suppose twelve people gave half a pint each.''

"Ah," O'Connor said. "I see. Or twenty-four people, giving a quarter-pint each. Or—"

"That's the idea," Malone said hurriedly. "I guess there'd be a point of diminishing returns, but that's the point. Would something like that be possible?"

O'Connor thought for what seemed like a long time. "It might," he said at last. "At least theoretically. But it would take a great deal of mental co-ordination among the participants. They would all have to be telepaths, of course."

"In order to mesh their thoughts right on the button, and direct them properly and at the correct time," Malone said. "Right?"

"Ah ... correct," O'Connor said. "Given that, Mr. Malone, I imagine that it might possibly be done."

"Wonderful," Malone said.

"However," O'Connor said, apparently glad to throw even a little cold water on the notion, "it could not be done for very long periods of time, you understand. It would happen in rather short bursts."

"That's right," Malone said, enjoying the crestfallen look on O'Connor's face. "That's exactly what I was looking for."

"I'm ... ah ... glad to have been of service," O'Connor said. "However, Mr. Malone, I should like to request—"

"Oh, don't worry," Malone said. "I won't slam the door." He vanished.

It was eight-fifty. Hurriedly, he rinsed himself off, shaved and put on his evening clothes. But he was still late—it was two minutes after nine when he showed up at the door that led off the lobby to the Universal Joint. Luba was, surprisingly, waiting for him there.

"Ready for a vast feast?" she asked pleasantly.

"In about a minute and a half," Malone said. "Do you mind waiting that long?"

"Frankly," Luba said, "in five minutes I will be gnawing holes in the gold paneling around here. And I do want to catch the first floor show, too. I understand they've got a girl who has—"

"That," Malone said sternly, "should interest me more than it does you."

"I'm always interested in what the competition is doing," Luba said.

"Nevertheless," Malone began, and stopped. After a second he started again: "Anyhow, this is important."

"All right," she said instantly. "What is it?"

He led her away from the door to an alcove in the lobby where they could talk without being overheard. "Can you get hold of Sir Lewis at this time of night?" he asked.

"Sir Lewis?" she said. "If ... if it's urgent, I suppose I could."

"It's urgent," Malone said. "I need all the data on telepathic projection I can get. The scientists have given me some of it—maybe Psychical Research has some more. I imagine it's all mixed up with ghosts and ectoplasm, but—"

"Telepathic projection," Luba said. "Is that where a person projects a thought into somebody else's mind?"

"That's it," Malone said. "Can Sir Lewis get me all the data on that tonight?"

"Tonight?" Luba said. "It's pretty late and what with sending them from New York to Nevada—"

"Don't bother about that," Malone said. "Just send 'em to the FBI Offices in New York. I'll have the boys there make copies and send the copies on." Instead, he thought, he would teleport to New York himself. But Luba definitely didn't have to know that.

"He'd have to send the originals," Luba said.

"I'll guarantee their safety," Malone said. "But I need the data right now."

Luba hesitated.

"Tell him to bill the FBI," Malone said. "Call him collect and he can bill the phone call, too."

"All right, Ken," Luba said at last. "I'll try."

She went off to make the call, and came back in a few minutes.

"O.K.?" Malone said.

She smiled at him, very gently. "O.K.," she said. "Now let's go in to dinner, before I get any hungrier and the Great Universal loses some of its paneling."

Dinner, Malone told himself, was going to be wonderful. He was alone with Luba, and he was in a fancy, fine, expensive place. He was happy, and Luba was happy, and everything was going to be perfectly frabjous.

It was. He had no desire whatever, when dinner and the floor show were over, to leave Luba. Unfortunately, he did have work to do—work that was more important than anything else he could imagine. He made a tentative date for the next day, went to his room, and from there teleported himself to FBI Headquarters, New York.

The agent-in-charge looked up at him. "Hey," he said. "I thought you were on vacation, Malone."

"How come everybody knows about me being on vacation?" Malone said sourly.

The agent-in-charge shrugged. "The only leave not canceled?" he said. "Hell, it was all over the place in five minutes."

"O.K., O.K.," Malone said. "Don't remind me. Is there a package for me?"

The agent-in-charge produced a large box. "A messenger brought it," he said.

"From the Psychical Research Society," he said. "What is it, ghosts?"

"Dehydrated," Malone said. "Just add ectoplasm and out they come, shouting Boo! at everybody."

"Sounds wonderful," the agent-in-charge said. "Can I come to the party?"

"First," Malone said judiciously, "you'd have to be dead. Of course I can arrange that—"

"Thanks," the agent-in-charge said, leaving in a hurry. Malone went on down to his office and opened the box. It contained books, pamphlets and reports from Sir Lewis, all dealing with some area of telepathic projection. He spent a few minutes looking them over and trying to make some connected sense out of them, but finally he gave up and just sat and thought. The material seemed to be no help at all; it told him even less than Dr. O'Connor had.

What he needed, he decided, was somebody to talk to. But who? He couldn't talk to the FBI, and nobody else knew much about what he was trying to investigate. He thought of Her Majesty and rejected the notion with a sigh. No, what he needed was somebody smart and quick, somebody who could be depended on, somebody with training and knowledge.

And then, very suddenly, he knew who he wanted.

"Well, now, Sir Kenneth," he said. "Let's put everything together and see what happens."

"Indeed," said Sir Kenneth Malone, "it is high time we did so, Sirrah. Proceed: I shall attend."

"Let's start from the beginning," Malone said. "We know there's confusion in all parts of the country—in all parts of the world, I guess. And we know that confusion is being caused by carefully timed accidents and errors. We also know that these errors appear to be accompanied by violent bursts of psionic static—violent energy. And we know, further, that on three specific occasions, these bursts of energy were immediately followed by a reversal of policy in the mind of the person on the receiving end."

"You mean," Sir Kenneth put in, "that these gentlemen changed their opinions."

"Correct," Malone said. "I refer, of course, to the firm of Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch, Spying Done Cheap."

"Indeed," Sir Kenneth said. "Then the operators of this strange force, whatever it may prove to be, must have some interest in allowing the spies' confession?"

"Maybe," Malone said. "Let's leave that for later. To get back to the beginning of all this: it seems to me to follow that the accidents and errors which have caused all the confusion throughout the world happen because somebody's mind is

changed just the right amount at the right time. A man does something he didn't intend to do—or else he forgets to do it at all."

"Ah," Sir Kenneth said. "We have done those things we ought not to have done; we have left undone those things we ought to have done. And you feel, Sirrah, that a telepathic command is the cause of this confusion?"

"A series of them," Malone said. "But we also know, from Dr. O'Connor, that it takes a great deal of psychic energy to perform this particular trick—more than a person can normally afford to expend."

"Marry, now," Sir Kenneth said. "Meseemeth this is not reasonable. Changing the mind of a man indeed seems a small thing in comparison to teleportation, or psychokinesis, or levitation or any such witchery. And yet it take more power than any of these?"

Malone thought for a second. "Sure it does," he said. "I'd say it was a matter of resistance. Moving an inanimate object is pretty simple—comparatively, anyhow—because inert matter has no mental resistance."

"And moving oneself?" Sir Kenneth said.

"There's some resistance there, probably," Malone said. "But you'll remember that the Fueyo system of training for teleportation involved overcoming your own mental resistance to the idea."

"True," Sir Kenneth said. "'Tis true. Then let us agree that it takes great power to effect this change. Where does our course point from that agreement, Sirrah?"

"Next," Malone said, "we have to do a little supposing. This project must be handled by a fairly large group, since no individual can do it alone. This large group has to be telepathic—and not only for the reasons Dr. O'Connor and I specified."

"And why else?" Sir Kenneth demanded.

"They've also got to know exactly when to make this victim of theirs change his mind," Malone said. "Right?"

"Correct," Sir Kenneth said.

"We've got to look for a widespread organization of telepaths," Malone said, "with enough mental discipline to hold onto a tough mental shield. Strong, trained, sane men."

"A difficult assignment," Sir Kenneth commented.

"Well," Malone said, "suppose you hold on for a second—don't go away—and let me figure something out."

"I shall wait," sir Kenneth said, "without."

"Without what?" Malone murmured. But there was no time for games. Now, then, he told himself—and sneezed.

He shook his head, cursed softly and went on.

Now, then....

There was an organization, spread all over the Western world, and with what were undoubtedly secret branches in the Soviet Union. The organization had to be an old one—because it had to have trained telepaths, of a high degree of efficiency. And training took time.

There was something else to consider, too. In order to organize to such a degree that they could wreak the complete havoc they were wreaking, the organization couldn't be completely secret; there are always leaks, always suspicious events, and a society that spent time covering all of those up would have no time for anything else.

So the organization had to be a known one, in the Western world at least—a known group, masquerading as something else.

So far, everything made sense. Malone frowned and tried to think. Where, he wondered, did he go from here?

Maybe this time a list would help. He found a pencil and a piece of paper, and headed the paper: Organization. Then he started putting down what he knew about it, and what he'd figured out:

1. Large

2. Old

3. Disguised

It sounded, so far, just a little like Frankenstein's Monster wearing a red wig. But what else did he know about it?

After a second's thought, he murmured: "Nothing," and put the pencil down.

But that, he realized, wasn't quite true. He knew one more thing about the organization. He knew they'd probably be immune to the confusion everybody else was suffering from. The organization would be—had to be—efficient. It would be composed of intelligent, superbly co-operative people, who could work together as a unit without in the least impairing their own individuality.

He reached for the pencil again, and put down:

4. Efficient

He looked at it. Now it didn't remind him so much of the Monster. But it didn't look terribly familiar, either. Who did he know, he thought, who was large, old, disguised and efficient?

It sounded like an improbable combination. He set the paper down, clearing off some of the PRS books to make room for it. And then he stopped.

The papers the PRS had sent him....

And he'd gotten them so quickly, so efficiently....

They were a large organization....

And an old one....

He looked for a desk phone, found one and grabbed at it frantically.

The girl who answered the phone looked familiar. Malone suddenly remembered to check the time—it was just after nine. The girl stared at him. She did not look terribly old, but she was large and she had to be disguised. There seemed to be a lot of teeth running around in this case, Malone thought, between the burlesque stripper in Las Vegas and Miss Dental Display here in New York. Nobody, he told himself, could have collected that many teeth honestly.

"Psychical Research Society," she said. "Oh, Mr. Malone. Good morning."

"Sir Lewis," Malone said in a rush. "Sir Lewis Carter. I want to talk to him. Hurry."

"Sir Lewis Carter?" the girl said very slowly. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Malone, but he won't be in at all today."

"Home number," Malone said desperately. "I've got to."

"Well, I can give you that, Mr. Malone," she said, "but it wouldn't do you any good, really. Because he went away on his vacation and when he does that he never tells us where. You know? He won't be back for two or three weeks," she added as an afterthought.

Malone said: "Oog," and thought for less than a second. "Somebody official," he said. "Got to talk to somebody official. Now."

"Oh, I can't do that either, Mr. Malone," the toothy girl said. "All of the executives already left on their vacation. They just left a skeleton force here at the office."

"They're all gone?" Malone said hollowly.

"That's right," the girl said with great cheer. "As a matter of fact, I'm in charge now. You know?"

"I'm afraid I do," Malone said. "It's very important, though. You don't have any idea where any of them went?"

"None at all," she said. "I'm sorry, but that's how it is. Maybe if you were me you'd ask questions, but I just follow orders and those were my orders. To take over until they get back. You know? They didn't tell me where and I just didn't ask."

"Great," Malone said. He wanted to shoot himself. Everything was obvious now—about twenty-four hours too late. And now, they'd all gone—for two weeks—or for good.

The girl's rancid voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Oh, Mr. Malone," she said. "I'm sorry, but I just remembered they left a note for you."

"A note?" Malone said. "For me?"

"Sir Lewis said you might call," the girl said, "and he left a message. If you'll hold on a minute I'll read it."

Malone waited tensely. The girl found a slip of paper, blinked at it and read:

"My dear Malone, I'm afraid that what you have deduced is quite correct; and, as you can see, that leaves us no alternative. Sorry. Miss Luba A. sends her apologies to you, since she is joining us; my apologies are also tendered." The girl looked up. "It's signed by Sir Lewis," she said. "Does that mean anything to you, Mr. Malone?"

"I'm afraid it does," Malone said blankly. "It means entirely too much."

**XIII**

After Miss Dental Display had faded from Malone's screen, he just sat there, looking at the dead, gray front of the visiphone and feeling about twice as dead and at least three times as gray.

Things, he told himself, were terrible. But even that sentence, which was a good deal more cheerful than what he actually felt, did nothing whatever to improve his mood. All of the evidence, after all, had been practically living on the tip of his nose for God alone knew how long, and not only had he done nothing about it, he hadn't even seen it.

There was the organization, staring him in the face. There was Luba—nobody's fool, no starry-eyed dreamer of occult dreams. She was part of the Psychical Research Society, why hadn't he thought to wonder why she was connected with it?

And there was his own mind-shield. Why hadn't he wondered whether other telepaths might not have the same shield?

He thought about Luba and told himself bitterly that from now on she was Miss Ardanko. Enough, he told himself, was enough. From now on he was calling her by her last name, formally and distantly. In his own mind, anyhow.

Facts came tumbling in on him like the side of a mountain falling on a hapless traveler, during a landslide season. And, Malone told himself, he had never possessed less hap in all of his ill-starred life.

And then, very suddenly, one more fact arrived, and pushed the rest out into the black night of Malone's bitter mind. He stood up, pushing the books away, and closed his eyes. When he opened them he went to the telephone in his Las Vegas hotel suite, and switched it on. A smiling operator appeared. Malone wanted to see him die of poison, slowly.

"Give me Room 4-T," he snapped. "Hurry."

"Room forty?" the operator asked.

"Damn it," Malone said, "I said 4-T and I meant 4-T. Four as in four and T as in—as in China. And hurry."

"Oh," the operator said. "Yes, sir." He turned away from the screen. "That would have been Miss Luba Ardanko's room, sir?" he said.

"Right," Malone snapped. "I ... wait a minute. Would have been?"

"That's correct, sir," the operator said. "She checked out, sir, early this morning. The room is unoccupied."

Malone swallowed hard. It was all true, then. Sir Lewis' note hadn't simply been one last wave of the red cape before an angry bull. Luba was one of them.

Miss Ardanko, he corrected himself savagely.

"What time?" he said.

The operator consulted an information board before him. "Approximately one o'clock, sir," he said.

"In the morning?"

"Yes, sir," the clerk said.

Malone closed his eyes. "Thanks," he said.

"You're quite welcome, sir," the operator said. "A courtesy of the Great Universal Ho—"

Malone cut him off. "Ho, indeed," he said bitterly. "Not to mention ha and hee—hee and yippe-ki-yay. A great life." He whisked himself back to New York in a dismal, rainy state of mind. As he sat down again to the books and papers the door to the room opened.

"You still here?" the agent-in-charge said. "I'm just going off duty and I came by to check. Don't you ever sleep?"

"I'm on vacation, remember?"

"Some vacation," the a-in-c said. "If you're on special assignment why not tell the rest of us?"

"I want it to be a surprise," Malone said. "And meantime, I'd appreciate it if I were left entirely to my own devices."

"Still conjuring up ghosts?" the a-in-c said.

"That," Malone said, "I don't know. I've got some long-distance calls to make."

He started with the overseas calls, leaving the rest of the United States time for the sun to get round to them. His first call, which involved a lot of cursing on Malone's part and much hard work for the operator, who claimed plaintively that she didn't know how things had gotten so snarled up, but overseas calls were getting worse and worse, went to New Scotland Yard in London. After great difficulty, Malone managed to get Assistant Commissioner C. E. Teal, who promised to check on the inquiry at once.

It seemed like years before he called back, and Malone leaped to the phone.

"Yes?" he said.

Teal, red-faced and apparently masticating a stick of gum, said: "I got C. I. D. Commander Gideon to follow up on that matter, Mr. Malone. As you know, it's after noon here—"

"And they're all out to lunch," Malone said.

"As a matter of fact," Teal went on, "they seem to have disappeared entirely. On vacation, that sort of thing. It is rather difficult attempting any full-scale tracing job just now; our men are terribly overworked. I imagine you've had reports from the New Scotland Yard representatives working with you there—"

"Oh, certainly," Malone said. "But the hour; what does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm afraid I was thinking of our Inspector Ottermole," Teal said. "He was sent to locate Dr. Carnacki, President of the Psychical Research Society here. On being told that Dr. Carnacki was 'out to lunch,' Ottermole investigated every restaurant and eating-place within ten blocks of the offices. Dr. Carnacki was not present; he, like the rest of the Society here, appears to have left for places unknown."

"Thorough work," Malone said.

"Ottermole's a good man," Teal said. "We've checked as quickly as possible, Mr. Malone. I would like to ask you a question in return."

"Ask away," Malone said.

Teal looked worried. "Do you people think this may have anything to do with the present ... ah ... trouble?" he said. "Things are quite upset here, as you know; so many members of Parliament have resigned or ... ah ... died that the realm is being run by a rather shakily assembled coalition government. There is even some talk of giving executive power to Her Majesty until a general election can be held."

For one brief moment, Malone thought Teal was talking about Rose Thompson. Then he recalled Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and felt better. Things weren't quite as bad as he'd thought.

But they were bad enough. "We simply don't know yet," he said untruthfully. "But as soon as anything definite comes up, of course, you'll be informed."

"Thank you, Mr. Malone," Teal said. "Of course, we'll do the same." And then, still masticating, he switched off.

Paris was next, then Rome, Berlin and a couple more. Every one had the same result. From Maigret of the Paris Sureté to Poirot in Belgium, from Berlin's strict officialdom to the cheerful Hollanders, all the reports were identical. The PRS of each country had gone underground.

Malone buried his face in his hands, thought about a cigar and decided that even a cigar might make him feel worse. Where were they? What were they doing now? What did they plan to do?

Where had they gone?

"Out of the everywhere," he heard himself say in a hollow, sepulchral voice, "into the here."

But where was the here?

He tried to make up his mind whether or not that made sense. Superficially, it sounded like extremely bad English, but he wasn't sure of anything any more. Things were getting much too confused.

He close his eyes wearily, and vanished.

When he opened them, he was in his Washington apartment. He went over to the big couch and sat down, feeling that if he were going to curse he might as well be comfortable while he did it. But, some minutes later, when the air was a bright electric blue around him, he didn't feel any better. Cursing was not the answer.

Nothing seemed to be.

What was his next move?

Where did he go from here?

The more he thought about it, the more his mind spun. He was, he realized, at an absolute, total dead end.

Oh, there were things he could do. Malone knew that very well. He could make a lot of noise and go through a lot of waste motion; that was what it amounted to. He could have all the homes of all the missing PRS members checked somehow. That would undoubtedly result in the startling discovery that the PRS members involved weren't home. He could have their dossiers sent to him, which would clutter everything with a great many more pieces of paper. But he felt quite sure that the pieces of paper would do no good at all. In general, he could raise all hell—and find nothing whatever.

Now, he told himself sadly, he had the evidence to start the FBI in motion. The only trouble was that he could think of nowhere for them to go.

And, though he had evidence that might convince Burris—the PRS members, after all, had done a rather unusual fadeout—he had nowhere near enough to carry the case into court, much less make a try at getting the case to stand up once carried in. That was one thing he couldn't do, he realized, he couldn't issue warrants for the arrest of anybody at all.

But, vacation or no vacation, he thought solemnly, he was an FBI Agent, and his motto was: "There's always a way." No normal method of tracking down the PRS members, or finding their present whereabouts, was going to work. They'd been covering themselves for such an emergency, undoubtedly, for a good many years—and if anyone got close, a burst of mental energy was quite enough to turn the seeker aside.

Nobody, Malone told himself grimly, was perfect. There were clues lying around somewhere; he was sure of that. There had to be. The problem was simply

to figure out where to look, and how to look, and what to look for.

Somewhere, the clues were sitting quietly and waiting for him to find them. The thought cheered him slightly, but not very much. He stood up slowly and went into the kitchen to start heating water for coffee. There was, he told himself, a long night ahead of him. He sighed gently. But there was no help for it; the work had to be done—and done quickly.

But when eight cigars had been reduced to ash, and what seemed like several gallons of coffee had sloshed their way into Malone's interior workings, his mind was as blank as a baby's. The lovely, opalescent dawn began to show in the East, and Malone tendered it some extremely rude words. Then, Haggard, red-eyed, confused, violently angry, and not one inch closer to a solution, he fell into a fitful doze on his couch.

When he awoke, the sun was high in the sky, and outside his window the cheerful sound of too much traffic floated in the air. Downstairs somebody was playing a television set too loudly, and the voice reached Malone's semiaware mind in a great tinny shout:

"The President, taking action on the current crisis, has declared martial law throughout the nation," a voice said in an important-sounded monotone. "Exempt from this proclamation are members of the Armed Services, Special Agents and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The proclamation, issued this morning, was made public in a special news conference which—"

Malone ripped out a particularly foul oath and sat up on the couch. "That," he muttered, "is a fine thing to wake up to." He focused his eyes, with only slight difficulty, on his watch. The time was a little after two.

"Later developments will be reported as and when they occur," the announcer was saying, "and in one hour a special panel of newscasters will be assembled here to discuss this latest action in the light of present happenings. Any special rules and regulations will be broadcast over this station—"

"Shut up," Malone said. He had wasted a lot of time doing nothing but sleeping, he told himself. This was no time to be listening to television. He got up and found, to his vague surprise, that he felt a lot better and clearer-headed than he had been. Maybe the sleep had actually done him some good.

He yawned, blinked and stretched, and then padded into the bathroom for a shower and shave. After he'd changed he thought about a morning or afternoon cup of coffee, but last night's dregs appeared to have taken up permanent residence in his digestive tract, and he decided against it at last. He swallowed some orange juice and toast and then, heaving a great sigh of resignation and brushing crumbs off his shirt, he teleported himself over to his office.

Now he knew that, sooner or later, he was going to have to talk to Burris. Burris had to know, even if there was nothing to be done.

And now was just as good—or as bad—a time as any.

He didn't hesitate. He punched the button on his intercom for Burris' office and then sat back, with his eyes closed, waiting for the well-known voice.

It didn't come.

Instead, Wolf, the Director's secretary, spoke up.

"Burris isn't in, Malone," he said. "He had to fly to Miami. I can get a call through to him on the plane, if it's urgent, but he'll be landing in about fifteen minutes. And he did say he'd call in this afternoon."

"Oh," Malone said. "Sure. O.K. It isn't urgent." He was just as glad of the reprieve; it gave him one more chance to work matters through to a solution, and hand it to Burris on a silver platter. "But why Miami?" he added.

"Don't you hear about anything any more?" Wolf asked.

"I've been on vacation."

"Oh," Wolf said. "Well, the Governor of Mississippi was assassinated yesterday, at Miami Beach."

"Ah," Malone said. He thought about it for a second. "Frankly," he said, "this does not strike me as an irreparable loss to the nation. Not even to Mississippi."

"You express my views precisely," Wolf said.

"How about the killer?" Malone said. "I gather they haven't got him yet, or Burris wouldn't be on his way down."

"No," Wolf said. "The killer would be on his way here instead. But you know how things are—everything's confused. Governor Flarion was walking along Collins Avenue when somebody fired at him, using a high-powered rifle with, I guess, a scope sight."

"Professional," Malone commented.

"It looks like it," Wolf said. "And he picked the right time for it, too—the way things are he was just one more confusion among the rest. Nobody even heard the sniper's shot; the governor just fell over, right there in the street. And by the time his bodyguards found out what had happened, it was impossible even to be sure just which way he was facing when the shot had been fired."

"And as I remember Collins Avenue—" Malone started.

"Right," Wolf said. "But it's even worse now, with everything going nuts. Out where Governor Flarion was taking his stroll, there's an awful lot of it to search. The boys are trying to find somebody who saw a man acting suspicious in any of the nearby buildings, or heard a shot, or saw anybody at all lurking or loitering anywhere near to the scene."

"Lovely," Malone said. "Sounds like a nice complicated job."

"You don't know the half of it," Wolf said. "There's also the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce. According to them, Flarion died of a heart attack, and not even

in Miami Beach. Everything happening down there isn't happening, according to them; Miami Beach is the one unsullied beauty spot in a mixed-up United States."

"All I can say," Malone offered, "is good luck. This is the saddest day in American history since the assassination of Huey P. Long."

"Agreed," Wolf said. "Want me to tell Burris you called?"

"Right," Malone said, and switched off.

The assassination of Nemours P. Flarion, he told himself, obviously meant something. It pointed straight toward some entirely new kind of answer. Granted, old Nemours P. had been a horrible mistake, a paranoid, self-centered, would-be, dictator whose final act was quite in keeping with the rest of his official life. Who else would be in Miami Beach, far away from his home state, while the President was declaring nationwide martial law?

But that, Malone told himself, wasn't the point. Or not quite the point, anyhow.

Maybe some work would dig up more facts. Anyhow, Malone was reasonably sure that he could reassign himself from vacation time, at least until he called Burris. And he had work to do; nobody was going to hand him anything on a silver serving salver.

He punched the intercom again and got the Records office.

"Yes, sir?" a familiar voice said.

"Potter," Malone said, "this is Malone. I want facsimiles of everything we have on the Psychical Research Society, on Sir Lewis Carter, and on Luba Ardanko. Both of these last are connected with the Society."

"You're back on duty, Malone?" Potter said.

"Right," Malone said. "Make that fast, will you?"

Potter nodded. "Right away," he said.

It didn't take long for the facsimile records to arrive, and Malone went right to work on them. Maybe somewhere in those records was the clue he had desperately needed. Where was the PRS? What were they doing now? What did they plan to do?

And why had they started the whole row in the first place?

The PRS, he saw, was even more widely spread than he had thought. It had branches in almost every major city in the United States, in Europe, South Africa, South America and Australia. There was even a small branch society in Greenland. True, the Communist disapproval of such nonmaterialistic, un-Marxian objectives as Psychical Research showed up in the fact that there were no registered branches in the Sino-Soviet bloc. But that, Malone thought, hardly mattered. Maybe in Russia they called themselves the Lenin Study Group, or the Better Borschch League. He was fairly sure, from all the evidence, that the PRS had some kind of organization even behind the Iron Curtain.

Money backing didn't seem to be much of a problem, either. Malone checked for the supporters of the organization and found a microfilmed list that ran into the hundreds of thousands of names, most of them ordinary people who seemed to be interested in spiritualism and the like, and who donated a few dollars apiece to the PRS. Besides this mass of small donations, of course, there were a few large ones, from independently wealthy men who gave support to the organization and seemed actively interested in its aims.

It wasn't an unusual picture; just an exceptionally big one.

Malone sighed and went on to the personal dossiers.

Sir Lewis Carter himself was a well-known astronomer and mathematician. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, the Royal Astronomical Society and the Royal Mathematical Society. He had been knighted for his contributions in higher mathematics only two years before he had come to live in the United States. Malone went over the papers dealing with his entry into the country carefully, but they were all in order and they contained absolutely nothing in the way of usable clues.

Sir Lewis' books on political and historical philosophy had been well-received, and he had also written a novel, "But Some Are More Equal," which, for a few weeks after publication, had managed to claw its way to the bottom of the best-seller list.

And that was that. Malone tried to figure out whether all this information did him any good, and the answer came very quickly. The answer was no. He opened the second dossier.

Luba Ardanko had been born in New York. Her mother had been a woman of Irish descent named Mary Foley, and had died in '69. Her father had been a Hungarian named Chris Yorgen Ardanko, and had died in the same year.

Malone sighed. Somewhere in the dossiers, he was sure, there was a clue, the basic clue that would tell him everything he needed to know. His prescience had never been so strong; he knew perfectly well that he was staring at the biggest, most startling and most complete disclosure of all. And he couldn't see it.

He stared at the folders for a long minute. What did they tell him? What was the clue.

And then, very slowly, the soft light of a prodigal sun illuminated his mind.

"Mr. Malone," Malone said gently, "you are a damned fool. There are times when it is necessary to discard the impossible after you have seen that the obscure is the obvious."

He wasn't sure whether that meant anything, or even whether he knew what he was saying. But, as the entire structure of facts became clear, and then turned right upside down in his mind and changed into something else entirely—something that told him not only who, and where, but also why, he became absolutely sure of one thing.

He knew the final answer.

And it was obvious. Obvious as all hell!

### XIV

There was, of course, only one thing to do and only one place to go. Malone teleported to the New York offices of the FBI and went immediately downstairs to the garage, where a specially-built Lincoln awaited him at all times.

One of the mechanics looked up curiously as Malone headed for the car. "Want a driver?" he said.

Malone thanked his lucky stars that he didn't have to get into any lengthy and time-consuming argument about whether or not he was on vacation. "No, thanks," he said. "This is a solo job."

That, he told himself, was for sure. He drove out onto the streets and into the heavy late-afternoon traffic of New York. The Lincoln handled smoothly, but Malone didn't press his luck in the traffic which he thought was even worse than the mess he'd driven through with the happy cab driver two days before. He wasn't in any hurry now, after all. He had all the time in the world, and he knew it. They—and, for once, Malone could put real names to that "they"—would still be waiting for him when he got there.

If he got there, he thought suddenly, turning a corner and being confronted with a great mass of automobiles wedged solidly fender to fender as far as the eye could see. The noise of honking horns was deafening, and great clouds of smoke rose up to make the scene look like the circle of Hell devoted to hot-rod drivers. Malone cursed and sweated until the line began to move, and then cursed and sweated some more until he was out of the city at last.

It took quite a lot of time. New York traffic, in the past forty-eight hours, hadn't gotten better; it had gotten a lot worse. He was nearly exhausted by the time he finally crossed the George Washington Bridge and headed west. And, while he drove, he began to let his reflexes take over most of the automotive problems now that New York City was behind him.

He took all his thoughts from behind the shield that had sheltered them and arrayed them neatly before him. They were beamed, he told himself firmly, to one particular group of persons and to no one else. Everything was perfectly clear; all he had to do now was explain it.

Malone had wondered, over the years, about the detectives in books. They always managed to wrap everything up in the last chapter, which was perfectly all right by itself. But they always had a whole crowd of suspects listening to them, too. Malone knew perfectly well that he could never manage a setup like that. People would interrupt him. Things would happen. Two dogs would rush in and start a battle royal on the floor. There would be an earthquake or an invasion of

little green Venusians, or else somebody would just decide to faint and cause a furor.

But now, at long last, he realized, he had his chance. Nobody could interrupt him. And he could explain to his heart's content.

Because the members of the PRS were telepathic. And Kenneth J. Malone, he thought happily, was not.

Luba, he was sure, would be tuned in on him as he drove toward their Pennsylvania hiding place. At least, he wanted to think so; it made things much more pleasant. And he hoped that Luba, or whoever was really tuned in, would alert everybody else, so they could all hook in and hear his grand final explanation of everything.

He opened his mind in that one special direction, beaming his thoughts to nobody else but the group he'd decided on. A second of silence passed.

And then a sound began. Malone had passed a company of soldiers some yards back, but he hadn't noticed them particularly; with the country under martial law, soldiers were going to be as common as tree frogs. Now, however, something different was happening.

Malone felt the car tremble slightly, and stopped. Past him, rolling along the side of the highway he was on, came a parade of thirty-ton tanks. They rumbled and roared their slow, elephantine way down the highway and, after what seemed about three days, disappeared from sight. Malone wondered what the tanks were for, and then dismissed it from his mind. It certainly wasn't very pleasant to think about, no matter how necessary it turned out to be.

He started up again. There were few cars on the road, although a lot of them were parked along the sides. A series of Closed signs on filling stations explained that, and Malone began to be grateful for the national emergency. It allowed him to drive without much interference, anyhow.

And a hearty good afternoon to all, he thought—especially to Miss Luba Ardanko. I hope she's tuned in ... and, if she isn't, I hope somebody alerts her. Frankly, I'd rather talk to her than to anyone else I can think of at the moment. As a matter of fact, it's a little easier to concentrate if I talk out loud, so I think I'll do that.

He swerved the car at this point, neatly avoiding a broken wooden crate that crouched in wait for him. "Road hog," he told it bitterly, and went on.

"Nothing personal," he went on after a second. "I don't care if you're all listening in, as a matter of fact. And I'm not going to hide anything." He thought a second, and then added: "Frankly, I'm not sure I've got anything to hide."

He paused and, in his imagination, he could almost hear Luba's voice.

I'm listening, Kenneth, she said. Go on.

He fished around in his mind for a second, wondering exactly where to start.

Then he decided, in the best traditions of the detective story, not to mention "Alice in Wonderland," to start at the beginning.

"The dear old Psychical Research Society," he said, speaking earnestly to his windshield, "has been going on for a good many years now—since the 1880's, as a matter of fact. That's a long time and it adds up to a lot of Psychical Research. A lot of famous and intelligent people have belonged to the Society. And, with all that, it's hardly surprising that, after nearly a hundred years of work, something finally turned up."

At this point, there was another interruption. A couple of sawhorses blocked the road ahead of Malone. As he stared at them, he felt his prescience begin to itch. He took out his .44 Magnum and slowed the car, memorizing the road as he passed it. He stopped the car before the sawhorses. Three enlisted men carrying M-1 rifles, and a stern, pale captain, his bars pointing sideways and glittering on his shoulders, appeared from the sides of the road.

The captain's voice was a military bark. "Out of the car!"

Malone began to obey.

"With your hands up!" the captain snapped. Malone dropped the .44 unobtrusively into his jacket pocket and complied. Then, as he came out of the car, he teleported himself back to a section of the road he'd memorized, ten feet behind the car. The four men were gaping, dumbfounded, as Malone drew his gun and shot them. Then he removed the sawhorses, got back in his car, reloaded the .44, put it back in his holster and drove on.

"Now," he said in a thoughtful tone. "Where was I?"

He imagined Luba's voice saying: You were telling us how, all this time, it's hardly surprising—

"Oh, yes," he said. "Well, then. So you solved some of the problems, you'd set. You learned how to use and control telepathy and teleportation, maybe, long before scientific boys like Dr. O'Connor became interested. But you never announced it publicly. You kept the knowledge all to yourself. 'Is this what the common folk call telepathy, Lord Bromley?' 'Yes, Lady Bromley.' 'Much too good for them, isn't it?' And maybe it is, at that; I don't know."

His thoughts, he recognized, were veering slightly. After a second he got back on the track.

"At any rate," he went on, "you—all of your out there—are responsible for what's happening to this country and all of Europe and Asia—and, for all I know, the suburbs of Hell.

"I remember one of the book facsimiles you got me, for instance," he said. "The writer tried for an 'expose' of the Society, in which he attempted to prove that Sir Lewis Carter and certain other members were trying to take over the world and run it to suit themselves, using their psionic powers to institute a rather hor-

rible type of dictatorship over the world.

"It was a pretty convincing book in a lot of ways. The author evidently know a lot about what he was dealing with."

At this point, Malone ran into another roadblock. There had been a fight of some kind up ahead, and a lot of cars with what looked like shell-holes in them were piled on one side of the road. The State Police were working under the confused direction of an Army major to straighten things out, while a bulldozer pushed the cars off the road onto the grass bordering it. The major stopped what he was doing and came to meet Malone as the car stopped.

"Get off the road," the major said surlily.

Malone looked up at him. "I've got some identification here," he said. "Mind if I get it out?"

The major reached for a gun and held it. "Go ahead," he said. "Don't try anything funny. It's been hell up and down this road, mister."

Malone flipped out his wallet and showed the identification.

"FBI?" the Major said. "What're you doing out here?"

"Special assignment," Malone said. "Oh ... by the way ... you might send some men back a ways. There are four dead mean in military uniforms lying on the road near a couple of sawhorses."

The major stared. "Dead?" he said at last. "Dead how?"

"I shot them," Malone said.

"You—" The major's finger tightened on the trigger of his gun.

"Now wait a minute," Malone said. "I said they were in military uniforms. I didn't say they were soldiers."

"But—"

"Three enlisted men carrying M-1 rifles?" Malone said. "When the M-1's out of date? And a captain with his bars on sideways? No, major. Those were renegades. Looters of some kind; they wanted to kill me and get the car and any valuables I happened to have."

The major, very slowly, relaxed his grip on the gun and his arm fell to his side. "You did the smart thing, Mr. Malone," he said.

"And I've got to go on doing it," Malone said. "I'm in a hurry."

He noticed a newspaper fluttering at the side of the road, not too near the cars. Somehow it made everything seem even more lonely and strange. The headlines fluttered into sight:

MARTIAL LAW EDICT

"MUST BE OBEYED," SAYS GOVERNOR

But Riots Are Feared In Outlying Towns

MAN AND WIFE CONFESS KILLING OF RELATIVES ABOARD PRIVATE PLANE: Force Kin To Drop Off

There was a photo of a woman there, too, and Malone could read just a little of the caption:

"Obeying the edict of martial law laid down by the President, Miss Helen A."

He wondered vaguely if her last name were Handbasket.

The major was looking at him. "O.K., then," he said.

"I can go on?" Malone said.

The major looked stern. "Drive on," he said.

Malone got the car going; the roadblock was lifted for him and he went on by.

After a moment, he said: "Pardon the interruption. I trust that all the devoted listeners to Uncle Kenneth's Happy Hour are still tuned in."

Go ahead, said Lou's voice.

"All right, let's take a look at what you've been doing. You've caused people to change their minds about what they've been intending to do. You can cause all sorts of hell to break loose that way. You have a lot of people you want to get rid of, so you play on their neuroses and concoct errors for them to fight. You rig things so that they quit, or get fired, or lose elections, or get arrested, or just generally get put out of circulation. Some of the less stable ones just up and did away with themselves.

"Sometimes, it's individuals who have to go. Sometimes, it's whole groups or maybe even whole nations. And sometimes it's in between, and you manage to foul up organizational moves with misplaced papers, mis-sent messages, errors, changed minds, and everything else you can think of.

"You know," he went on, "at first I couldn't see any pattern in what was going on—though I remember telling myself that there was a kind of justice in the way this thing was just as hard on gangsters as it was on businessmen and Congressmen.

"The Congressman from Gahoochie County, Arkansas, gets himself in a jam over fraudulent election returns on the same day that the accountant for the Truckers Union sends Mike Sands' books to the Attorney General. Simple justice, I call it.

"And, you know, seen from that viewpoint, this whole caper might come out looking pretty good. If most of the characters you've taken care of are just the boys who needed taking care of, I'd say more power to you—except for one thing. It's all right to get rid of all the fools, idiots, maniacs, blockheads, morons, psychopaths, paranoids, timidity-ridden, fear-worshipers, fanatics, thieves, and the rest of the general, all-round, no-good characters; I'm all for it. But not this way. Oh, no.

"You've pressed the panic button, that's what you've done.

"You've done more damage in two weeks than all those fumblebrains have been able to do in several myriads of lifetimes. You've loused up the economy of this nation and every other civilized nation. You've caused riots in which innocent people have died; you've caused thousands more to lose their businesses and their savings. And only God Himself knows how many more are going to die of starvation and murder before this thing is over.

"And you can't tell me that all of those people deserve to die."

He slowed down as he came to a small town, and for the first time in many miles he focused on the road ahead with his full mind. The town, he saw, looked like a shambles. There were four cars tastefully arranged on the lawn of what appeared to be the local library. Across the street, a large drugstore was in flames, and surprised people were hurrying to put it out. There didn't seem to be any State Police or Army men around, but they'd passed through; Malone saw a forgotten overseas cap lying on the road ahead.

With a shock, he realized that he was now in Pennsylvania, close to where he wanted to go. A signboard told him the town he was looking at was Milford. It was a mess, and Malone hoped fervently that it was a mess that could eventually be cleaned up.

The town was a small one, and Malone was glad to get out of it so quickly.

"That's the kind of thing I mean," he said aloud. Then he paused. "Are you there, anybody?"

He imagined he heard Luba's voice saying: Yes, Ken. Yes, I'm here. Listening to you.

Imagination was fine but, of course, there was no way for them to get through to him. They were telepathic, but Kenneth J. Malone, he told himself sadly, was not.

"Hello, out there," he went on. "I hope you've been listening so far, because there isn't too much more for me to say.

"Just this: you've wrecked my country, and you've wrecked almost all of the rest of civilization. You've brought my world down around my ears.

"I have every logical reason to hate your guts. By all the evidence I have, you are a group of the worst blackguards who ever existed; by all the evidence, I should be doing everything in my power to exterminate you.

"But I'm not.

"My prescience tells me that what you've been doing is right and necessary. I'm damned if I can see it, but there it is. I just hope you can explain it to me."

## XV

Soon, he was in the midst of the countryside. It was, of course, filled with country. It spread around him in the shape of hills, birds, trees, flowers, grass, billboards and other distractions to the passing motorist.

It took Malone better than two hours more to find the place he was looking for. Long before he found it, he had come to the conclusion that finding country estates in Pennsylvania was only a shade easier than finding private homes in the Borough of Brooklyn. In both cases, he had found himself saddled with the same frantic search down what seemed likely routes which turned out to lead nowhere. He had found, in both cases, complete ignorance of the place on the part of local citizens, and even strong doubts that the place could possibly have any sort of existence.

The fact that is was growing dark didn't help much, either.

But he found it at last. Rounding a curve in a narrow, blacktop road, he saw the home behind a grove of trees.

He recognized it instantly.

He had seen it so often that he felt as if he knew it intimately.

It was a big, rambling, Colonial-type mansion, painted a blinding and beautiful white, with a broad, pillared porch and a great carved front door. The front windows were curtained in rich purples, and before the house was a great front garden, and tall old trees. Malone half-expected Scarlett O'Hara to come tripping out of the house at any minute shouting: "Rhett! The children's mush is on fire!" or something equally inappropriate.

Inside it, however, if Malone were right, was not the magnetic Scarlett. Inside the house were some of the most important members of the PRS—and one person who was not a member.

But it was impossible to tell from the outside. Nothing moved on the well-kept grounds, and the windows didn't show so much as the flutter of a purple curtain. There was no sound. No cars were parked around the house—nor, Malone realized, thinking of "Gone With the Wind," were there any horses or carriages.

The place looked deserted.

Malone thought he knew better, but it took a few minutes for him to get up enough courage to go up the long driveway. He stared at the house. It was an old one, he knew, built long before the Civil War and originally commanding a huge tract of land. Now, all that remained of the vast acreage was the small portion that surrounded the house.

But the original family still inhabited it, proud of the house and of their part in its past. Over the years, Malone knew, they had kept it up scrupulously, and the place had been both restored and modernized on the inside without harming the

classic outlines of the hundred-and-fifty-year-old structure.

A fence surrounded the estate, but the front gate was swinging open. Malone saw it and took a deep breath. Now, he told himself, or never. He drove the Lincoln through the opening slowly, alert for almost anything.

There was no disturbance. Thirty yards from the front door he pulled the car to a cautious stop and got out. He started to walk toward the building. Each step seemed to take whole minutes, and everything he had thought raced through his mind again. Nothing seemed to move anywhere, except Malone himself.

Was he right? Were the people he'd been beaming to really here? Or had he been led astray by them? Had he been manipulated, in spite of his shield, as easily as they had manipulated so many others?

That was possible. But it wasn't the only possibility.

Suppose, he thought, that he was perfectly right, and that the group was waiting inside. And suppose, too, that he'd misunderstood their motives.

Suppose they were just waiting for him to get a little closer.

Malone kept walking. In just a few steps, he could be close enough so that a bullet aimed at him from the house hadn't a real chance of missing him.

And it didn't have to be bullets, either. They might have set a trap, he thought, and were waiting for him to walk into it. Then they would hold him prisoner while they devised ways to....

To what?

He didn't know. And that was even worse; it called up horrible terrors from the darkest depths of Malone's mind. He continued to walk forward.

Finally he reached the steps that led up to the porch, and took them one at a time.

He stood on the porch. A long second passed.

He took a step toward the high, wide and handsome oaken door. Then he took another step, and another.

What was waiting for him inside?

He took a deep breath, and pressed the doorbell button.

The door swung open immediately, and Malone involuntarily stepped back.

The owner of the house smiled at him from the doorway. Malone let out his breath in one long sigh of relief.

"I was hoping it would be you," he said weakly. "May I come in?"

"Why, certainly, Malone. Come on in. We've been expecting you, you know," said Andrew J. Burris, Director of the FBI.

## XVI

Malone sat, quietly relaxed and almost completely at ease, in the depths of a huge, comfortable, old-fashioned Morris chair. Three similar chairs were clustered around a squat, massive coffee table, made of a single slab of dark wood set on short, curved legs. Malone looked around at the other three with a relaxed feeling of recognition: Andrew J. Burris, Sir Lewis Carter and Luba Ardanko.

Sir Lewis softly exhaled a cloud of smoke as he removed the briar from his mouth. "Malone," he asked gently, "how did you know we would be here?"

"Well," Malone said, "I just ... I mean, it was obvious as soon as I—" He stopped, frowning. "I had one thing to go on, anyway," he said. "I figured out the PRS was responsible for all the troubles because it was so efficient. And then, while I was sitting and staring at the file reports, it suddenly came to me: the FBI was just as efficient. So it was obvious."

"What was?" Burris said.

Malone shrugged. "I thought you'd been keeping me on vacation because your mind was being changed," he said. "Now I can see you were doing it of your own free will."

"Yes," Sir Lewis said. "But how did you know you'd find us here, Malone?"

There was a shadow in the room, but not a visible one. Malone felt the chill of sudden danger. Whatever was going to happen, he realized, he would not be around for the finish. He, Kenneth Joseph Malone, the cuddly, semi-intrepid FBI Agent he had always known and loved, would never get out of this deadly situation. If he lived, he would be so changed that—

He didn't even want to think about it.

"What sort of logic," Sir Lewis was saying, "led you to the belief that we would all be here, in Andrew's house?"

Malone forced his mind to consider the question. "Well," he began, "it isn't exactly logic, I guess."

Luba smiled at him. He felt a little reassured, but not much. "You should have phrased that differently," she said. "It's: 'It isn't exactly logic. I guess.'"

"Not guess," Sir Lewis said. "You know. Prescience, Malone. Your precognitive faculty."

"All right," Malone said. "All right. So what?"

"Take it easy," Burris put in. "Relax, Malone. Everything's going to be all right."

Sir Lewis waved a hand negligently. "Let's continue," he said. "Tell me, Malone: if you were a mathematics professor, teaching a course in calculus, how would you grade a paper that had all the answers but didn't show the work?"

"I never took calculus," Malone said. "But I imagine I'd flunk him."

"Why?" Sir Lewis said.

"Because if he can't back up his answer," Malone said slowly, "then it's no better than a layman's guess. He has to give reasons for his answers; otherwise nobody else can understand him."

"Fine," Sir Lewis said. "Perfectly fine. Now—" he puffed at his pipe—"can you give me a logical reason for arriving at the decision you made a few hours ago?"

The danger was coming closer, Malone realized. He didn't know what it was or how to guard himself against it. All he could do was answer, and play for time.

"While I was driving up here," he said, "I sent you a message. I told you what I knew and what I believed about the whole world picture as it stands now. I don't know if you received it, but I—"

Luba spoke without the trace of a smile. "You mean you didn't know?" she said. "You didn't know I was answering you?"

That was the first pebble of the avalanche, Malone knew suddenly—the avalanche that was somehow going to destroy him. "You forced your thoughts into my mind, then," he said as coolly as he could. "Just as you forced decision on the rest of society."

"Now, dammit, Malone!" Burris said suddenly. "You know those bursts take a lot of energy, and only last for a fraction of a second!"

Malone blinked. "Then you ... didn't—"

Of course I didn't force anything on you, Kenneth. I can't. Not all the power of the entire PRS could force anything through your shield. But you opened it to me.

It was Luba's mental "voice." Malone opened his mouth, shut it and then, belatedly, snapped shut the channel through which he'd contacted her. Luba gave him a wry look, but said nothing. "You mean I'm a telepath?" Malone asked weakly.

"Certainly," Sir Lewis snapped. "At the moment, you can only pick up Luba—but you are certainly capable of picking up anyone, eventually. Just as you learned to teleport, you can learn to be a telepath. You—"

The room was whirling, but Malone tried to keep his mind steady. "Wait a minute," he said. "If you received what I sent, then you know I've got a question to ask."

There was a little silence.

Finally Sir Lewis looked up. "You want to know why you felt we—the PRS—were innocent of the crimes you want to charge us with. Very well." He paused. "We have wrecked civilization: granted. We could have done it more smoothly: granted."

"Then—"

Sir Lewis' face was serious and steady. Malone tensed.

"Malone," Sir Lewis said, "do you think you're the only one with a mental shield?"

Malone shook his head. "I guess stress—fixity of mind or purpose—could develop it in anyone," he said. "At least, in some people."

"Very well," Sir Lewis said. "Now, among the various people of the world who have, through one necessity or another, managed to develop such shields—"

Burris broke in impatiently. His words rang, and then echoed in the old house.

"Some fool," he said flatly, "was going to start the Last War."

"So you had to stop it," Malone said after a long second. "But I still don't see.."

"Of course you don't," Sir Lewis said. "But you've got to understand why you don't see it first."

"Because I'm stupid," Malone said.

Luba was shaking her head. Malone turned to face her. "Not stupid," she said. "But some people, Kenneth, have certain talents. Others have—other talents. There's no way of equating these talents; all are useful, each performs a different function."

"And my talent," Malone said, "is stupidity. But—"

She lit a cigarette daintily. "Not at all," she said. "You've done a really tremendous job, Kenneth. I was trained ever since I was a baby to use my psionic abilities—the PRS has known how to train children in that line ever since 1970. Only Mike Fueyo developed a system for instruction independently; the boy was, and is, a genius, as you've noticed."

"Agreed," Malone said. "But—"

"You, however," Luba said, "have the distinction of being the first human being who has, as an adult, achieved his full powers without childhood training. In addition, you're the only human being who has ever developed to the extent you have—in precognition, too."

She puffed on the cigarette. Malone waited.

"But what you don't have," she said at last, very carefully, "is the ability to reason out the steps you've taken, after you've reached the proper conclusion."

"Like the calculus student," Malone said. "I flunk." Something inside him grated over the marrow in his bones. It was as though someone had decided that the best cure for worry was coarse emery in the joints, and he, Kenneth J. Malone, had been picked for the first experiment.

"You're not flunking," Luba said. "You're a very long way from flunking, Kenneth."

Burris cleared his throat suddenly. Malone turned to him. The Head of the FBI stuck an unlighted cigar into his mouth, chewed it a little, and then said: "Malone, we've been keeping tabs on you. Your shield was unbreakable—but we have been able to reach the minds of people you've talked to: Mike Sands, Primo Palveri, and so on. And Her Majesty, of course: you opened up a gap in your shield to talk

to her, and you haven't closed it down. Until you started broadcasting here on the way up, naturally."

"All right," Malone said, waiting with as much patience as possible for the point.

"I tried to take you off the case," Burris went on, "because Sir Lewis and the others felt you were getting too close to the truth. Which you were, Malone, which you were." He lit his cigar and looked obscurely pleased. "But they didn't know how you'd take it," he said. "They ... we ... felt that a man who hadn't been trained since childhood to accept the extrasensory abilities of the human mind couldn't possibly learn to accept the reality of the job the PRS has to do."

"I still don't," Malone said. "I'm stupid. I flunk. Remember?"

"Now, now," Burris said helplessly. "Not at all, Malone. But we were worried. I lied to you about those three spies—I put the drug in the water-cooler. I tried to keep you from learning the Fueyo method of teleportation. I didn't want you to learn that you were telepathic."

"But I did," Malone said, "And what does that make me?"

"That," Sir Lewis cut in, "is what we're attempting to find out."

Malone felt suitably crushed, but he wasn't sure by what. "I've got some questions," he said after a second. "I want to know three things."

"Go ahead," Sir Lewis said.

"One:" Malone said, "How come Her Majesty and the other nutty telepaths didn't spot you? Two: How come you sent me out on these jobs when you were afraid I was dangerous? And three: What was it that was so safe about busting up civilization? How did that save us from the Last War?"

Sir Lewis nodded. "First," he said, "we've developed a technique of throwing up a shield and screening it with a surface of innocuous thoughts—like hiding behind a movie screen. Second ... well, we had to get the jobs done, Malone. And Andrew thought you were the most capable, dangerous or not. For one thing, we wanted to get all the insane telepaths in one place; it's difficult to work when the atmosphere's full of such telepathic ravings."

"But wrecking the world because of a man with a mind-shield—why not just work things so his underlings wouldn't obey him?" Malone shook his head. "That sounds more reasonable."

"It may," Sir Lewis said. "But it wouldn't work. As a matter of fact, it was tried, and it didn't work. You see, the Sino-Soviet top men were smart enough to see that their underlings were being tampered with. And they've developed a system, partly depending on automatic firing systems, partly on individuals with mind-blocks—that is, people who aren't being tampered with—which we can't disrupt directly. So we had to smash them."

"And the United States at the same time," Burris said. "The economic balance had to be kept; a strong America would be forced in to fill the power vacuum otherwise, and that would make for an even worse catastrophe. And if we weren't in trouble, the Sino-Soviet Bloc would blame their mess on us. And that would start the Last War before collapse could get started. Right, Malone?"

"I see," Malone said, thinking that he almost did. He told himself he could feel happy now; the danger—which hadn't been danger to him, really, but danger from him toward the PRS, toward civilization—was over. But he didn't feel happy. He didn't feel anything.

"There's a crisis building in New York," Sir Lewis said suddenly, "that's going to take all our attention. Malone, why don't you ... well, go home and get some rest? We're going to be busy for a while, and you'll want to be fresh for the work coming up."

"Sure," Malone said listlessly. "Sure."

As the others rose, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he vanished.

**XVII**

Two hours passed, somehow. Bourbon and soda helped them pass, Malone discovered; he drank two high-balls slowly, trying not to think about anything. He felt terrible. After a while he made himself a third high-ball and started on it. Maybe this would make him feel better. Maybe he thought, he ought to break out his cigars and celebrate.

But there didn't seem to be very much to celebrate somehow. He felt like an amoeba on a slide being congratulated on having successfully conquered the world.

He drank some more bourbon-and-soda. Amoebae, he told himself, didn't drink bourbon-and-soda. He was better off than an amoeba. He was happier than an amoeba. But somehow he couldn't imagine any amoeba in the world, no matter how heart-broken, feeling any worse than Kenneth J. Malone.

He looked up. There was another amoeba in the room.

Then he frowned. She wasn't an amoeba, he thought. She was the scientist the amoeba was supposed to fall in love with, so the scientist could report on everything he did, so all the other scien—psiontists could know all about him. But whoever heard of a scien—psiontist—falling in love with an amoeba? Nobody. It was fate. And fate was awful. Malone had often suspected it, but now he was sure. Now he was looking at things from the amoeba's side, and fate was terrible.

"No, Ken," the psiontist said. "It needn't be at all like that."

"Oh, yes, it need," Malone said positively. "It need be even worse. When I

have some more to drink, it'll be even worse. Wait and see."

"Ken," Luba said softly, "you don't have to suffer this way."

"No," Malone said agreeably, "I don't. You could shoot me and then I'd be dead. Just quit all this amoebing around, O.K.?"

"You're already half shot," Luba said sharply. "Now be quiet and listen. You're angry because you've fallen in love with me and you're all choked up over the futility of it all."

"Exactly," Malone said. "Ex-positively-actly. You're a psionic super-man—woman. You can figure things out in your own little head instead of just getting along on dum psionic luck like us amoebae. You're too far above me."

"Ken, listen!" Luba snapped. "Look into my mind. You can link up with me: go ahead and do it. You can read me clear down to the subconscious if you want to."

Malone blinked.

"Now, Ken!" Luba said.

Malone looked. For a long time.

Half an hour later, Kenneth J. Malone, alone in his room, was humming happily to himself as he brushed a few specks of dust from the top of his best royal blue bowler. He faced the mirror on the wall, puffed on the cigar clenched between his teeth, and adjusted the bowler to just the right angle.

There was a knock on the door. He went and opened it, carefully disposing of the cigar first. "Oh," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Just saying hello," Thomas Boyd grinned. "Back at work?"

Boyd didn't know, of course, what had happened. Nor need he ever know. "Just about," Malone said. "Spending the evening relaxing, though."

"Hm-m-m," Boyd said. "Let me guess. Her name begins with L?"

"It does not," Malone said flatly.

"But—" Boyd began.

Malone cast about in his mind for an explanation. Telling Boyd the truth—that Luba and Kenneth J. Malone just weren't equals as far as social intercourse went—would leave him exactly nowhere. But, somehow, it had to be said. "Tom," he said, "suppose you met a beautiful girl—charming, wonderful, brilliant."

"Great," Boyd said. "I like it already."

"Suppose she looked about ... oh ... twenty-three," Malone went on.

"Do any more supposing," Boyd said, "and I'll be pawing the ground."

"And then," Malone said, very carefully, "suppose you found out, after you'd been out with her ... well, when you took her out, say, you met your grandmother."

"My grandmother," Boyd said virtuously, "doesn't go to joints like that."

"Use your imagination," Malone snapped. "And suppose your grandmother

recognized the girl as an old schoolmate of hers.''

Boyd swallowed hard. ''As a what?''

''An old schoolmate,'' Malone said. ''Suppose this girl were so charming and everything just because she'd had ... oh, ninety years or so to practice in.''

''Malone,'' Boyd said in a depressed tone, ''you can spoil more ideas—''

''Well,'' Malone said, ''would you go out with her again?''

''You kidding?'' Boyd said. ''Of course not.''

''But she's the same girl,'' Malone said. ''You've just found out something new about her, that's all.''

Boyd nodded. ''So,'' he said, ''you found out something new about Luba. Like, maybe, she's ninety years old?''

''No,'' Malone said. ''Nothing like that. Just—something.'' He remembered Queen Elizabeth's theory of politeness toward superiors: people, she'd said, act as if they believed their bosses were superior to them, but they didn't believe it.

On the other hand, he thought, when a man knows and believes that someone actually is superior—then, he doesn't mind at all. He can depend on that superiority to help him. And love, ordinary man-and-woman love, just can't exist.

Nor, Malone told himself, would anyone want it to. It would, after all, be damned uncomfortable.

''So who's the girl?'' Boyd said. ''And where? The clubs are all closed, and the streets probably aren't very safe just now.''

''Barbara Wilson,'' Malone said, ''and Yucca Flats. I ought to be able to get a fast plane.'' He shrugged. ''Or maybe teleport,'' he added.

''Sure,'' Boyd said. ''But on a night with so many troubles—''

''Oh, King Henry,'' Malone said, ''hearken. A man who looks as historical as you do ought to know a little history.''

''Such as?'' Boyd said, bristling slightly.

''There have always been troubles,'' Malone said. ''In the Eighth Century, it was Saracens; in the Fourteenth, the Black Death. Then there was the Reformation, and the Prussians in 1870, and the Spanish in 1898, and—''

''And?'' Boyd said.

Malone took a deep breath. He could almost feel the court dress flowing over him, as the court manners did. Lady Barbara, after all, attendant to Her Majesty, would expect a certain character from him.

After a second, he had it.

''In 1914, it was enemy aliens,'' said Sir Kenneth Malone.

**THE END**